



JOHN
SAWNEY

THE RUIN

THE RUIN
by John Sawney

For SMH.

© John Sawney 2013

First published 2013 in the United States by Fireship Press.

Revised edition published 2020.

Cover illustration: 'Remains of the Villa of Maecenas at Tivoli' (detail),

Vedute di Roma by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, 1763.

Epigraph translations by the author.

Special thanks to John Rogers, Gemma Scott, Christopher Hawley and Mark Lord.

*...cwoman woldagas,
swylt eall fornom secgrofra wera;
wurdon hyra wigsteal westen stapolas,
brosnade burgsteall.*

(‘...days of pestilence came, death took away all the brave men;
the mercenaries’ ramparts were laid waste, the citadel crumbled.’)

From ‘The Ruin’, an Anglo-Saxon poem in the *Codex Exoniensis*.

Dies tenebrosa sicut nox.

(‘Days as dark as night.’)

Annales Cambriae, entry for the year 447 CE.

GUIDE TO PLACE NAMES

Abona – River Avon
Altisiodorum – Auxerre
Anderitum – Pevensey
Aquae Sulis – Bath
Arecluta – the region around Dumbarton
Armorica – Brittany and bordering regions
Ariconium – Weston under Penyard, Herefordshire
Bomium – Cowbridge, Glamorgan
Caledonia – northern part of Scotland
Calleva – Silchester
Cantia – Kent
Canovia – River Conwy
Corinium – Cirencester
Corisopitum – Quimper, Brittany
Dumnonia – Devon and Cornwall
Durobrovis – Rochester
Durovernum – Canterbury
Dubris – Dover
Eboracum – York
Gallia – Gaul; modern France and bordering regions
Glevum – Gloucester
Hibernia – Ireland
Isca/Legion City – Caerleon
Londinium – London
Port Abona – Sea Mills, near Bristol
Povisia – Powys and bordering regions
Rutupis – Richborough
Sabren – River Severn
Segontium – Caernarfon
Sorviodunum – Old Sarum, near Salisbury
Tamesis – River Thames
Tamium – Cardiff
Venedotia – roughly modern Gwynedd
Venta Belgarum – Winchester
Venta Silurum – Caerwent
Verulamium – St Albans
Viroconium – Wroxeter

I

Market day in Glevum, the big town at the mouth of the Sabren in the west, always had an air of danger about it.

The beggars came out from the slums on market days. Their children crowded the visitors, cheeks darkened by sun and dirt, cupped hands held aloft. The garrison kept them in check most of the time, but then every so often a visitor would turn up in an alleyway with his head bashed in and his pockets emptied. The soldiers never looked too hard for the culprit. Better to let the occasional murder go by quietly than risk the town's reputation.

For those who worked in the basilica at the bottom of the town square, it was an irrelevance. There were no beggars here. Today a small gathering watched while the Bishop of Glevum swore in the new magistrate, who was now theoretically in charge of the town. This was the bishop's brother, a huge hulking creature with sloping shoulders, thinning hair and a heavy brow that all but hid his eyes. His name was Eldol.

Eldol was generally taken for a halfwit, and while this was not quite true, he was certainly no scholar. He had learnt the words for the ceremony phonetically without understanding much of it. There were occasional whispers and stifled laughs from the small audience. 'The tame bear', they called him; someone to keep the seat warm while more capable men conducted the actual business of running the town. It was too much for one man to govern Glevum. It had been too much even for the previous magistrate, Eldol's father.

No one was more surprised by his appointment to the post than Eldol himself. He had never planned to enter a career in politics. His father had died, quite unexpectedly, towards the end of March. A few days later the tribunes came to Eldol, whom they found in a stupor of grief and wine, to tell him that he had been elected in his place.

'I'd better get married,' he had thought dimly, 'a magistrate should have a wife.' There had been no success on that front yet, but it was still only April. He was in no mood to begin courting the daughters of powerful men while his father's body was barely cold. Maybe Eldol would find his new job interesting. It might be an opportunity to change some of the things he disliked about the town. The housing for the poor, for instance, or the flood defences. When he mentioned this to the tribunes, they were evasive, launching into streams of economic jargon. When he mentioned it to the bishop, the answer he got was rather more frank.

'You are an idiot, Eldol,' his brother said. 'They want you to sit around in your quarters or in the gardens, doing whatever it is you normally do, while they run the town. Every so often you'll have to go and attend a meeting of the Consilium. In that event, just sit at the

back with your mouth shut and don't embarrass us. Glevum runs by itself. Just sit at the back and stay quiet.'

The ceremony concluded to a trickle of applause. Eldol turned around to face his audience, the same pudgy and overdressed men who had thrust this semblance of greatness upon him. Behind them the soldiers blinked and scratched themselves. A few people came forward to clap him on the arm and say 'well done', and then the audience began to leave as quickly as politeness would allow. Eldol turned to his brother with a hangdog look. To his surprise, the bishop smiled at him.

'You did well. There were a few slip-ups here and there, but on the whole you held it together. Not bad at all, considering we only worked on it for a couple of weeks.'

'Thank you,' said Eldol. 'I was nervous. Is there anything coming up that I should know about?'

'Nothing important. The prefect of the garrison wants to show you around the town defences today. They've been wanting to make some changes. Raiding parties have been sighted in the estuary again, and everyone is getting nervous. Of course, you won't have to make any decisions on the defences, but you might find it interesting.'

'When does he want me to meet him?'

'No particular time, but he's in the barracks if you want to do it now.'

Eldol left the basilica and cut through the square, shoving his way through the sweaty bodies and the noise. None of them—the shopkeepers, the visitors, the beggars—seemed to have any idea who he was. At the barracks he found the prefect, an ancient bow-legged figure who wore full armour in the unseasonable heat.

'See over there, sir?' the prefect said when they were on the ramparts of the town walls. 'That was the original site of the town. Well, it was just a fort then. Lowest fordable section of the river. Your late father was open to the idea of putting some extra fortifications there, sir, before... well. It's really not a big job. All we'd have to do is...'

Eldol's father had died sitting up at his desk. His clerks had left him in the evening, poring over some paperwork, and then they found him cold and open-eyed in the morning, blue at the lips. A stylus was clutched in one of his hands, a writing tablet in the other. They said it was the worry that had killed him. Everything that had happened since was all part of the same nightmare, dizzying and nonsensical. All Eldol could do was play along and see what would happen next. Maybe one day he would wake up and everything would be back to normal.

'...on the northwest approach, where it comes across from the island. That's where the best farmland is, you see. Richer pickings. I think the bridge will need some repair work too, but of course that's not my department. It won't be too hard to push most of our resources towards the river if need be. We might need it before long, the way things are looking.'

Eldol realised the prefect was waiting for an answer, and he nodded.

'Whatever you say; I'll leave this to you. It sounds like you've got it all worked out.'

But now the prefect was frowning at something behind him.

'You've a visitor, sir.'

A soldier Eldol did not recognise, a young cavalryman, was climbing the stairs towards them. He was breathless by the time he reached the rampart walk, and he saluted Eldol limply.

‘News from Londinium, sir.’

The cavalryman handed Eldol an unsealed letter which he in turn handed to the prefect, who looked at him quizzically.

‘I can’t read.’

‘Oh, well...’ The prefect failed heroically to hide his disgust. ‘Never mind, sir, never mind. I’ll have a look... it’s in Latin, of course. I’ll translate... “The Consilium of Britannia Maxima requests the presence of Marcus Canidius Eldolus, magistrate for the Colonia of Glevum for the funeral rites of...”’ The prefect’s face fell.

‘Funeral?’ said Eldol. ‘Whose funeral?’

The prefect nodded at the cavalryman, who saluted more briskly this time, and made his way back down the steps.

‘Britu is dead,’ said the prefect, but Eldol’s face was blank. ‘Britu was the eldest of Vortigern’s sons, sir. You do know who Vortigern is?’

‘Yes. I’m not a halfwit, you know.’

‘Of course, sir, of course not.’ His eyes grew distant. ‘It could be that things will finally start to settle down now. It’ll take years to replace the troops that damn fool led to their deaths, but still. It might finally be all over.’

‘So... so it’s a good thing that Britu’s dead?’

‘Lord forgive me for saying so, but yes. Of course, you can’t say anything like that when you go to Londinium. Lord knows there’ll be some patching up to do with Hengest.’

‘Who’s Hengest?’

Again the prefect failed to hide his disgust.

‘I’ll fill you in as we walk, sir; better get you back to the barracks. We’ll have to kit you out in some good armour for this. It’ll be a military funeral, of course. I do hope we’ve got something in your size...’

II

What struck Eldol most about Londinium was that no one seemed to live there.

As the funeral procession marched past the old governor's palace, their footsteps echoed back from the empty side streets like the sound of not-too-distant drums. In some of the side streets there were still decades-old pieces of graffiti wishing death upon Honorius, the last of the Caesars to count the island among his dominions. It was as though time had stopped there in order to preserve a moment of greatness that could never be approached again.

Hundreds of standards and pennants flapped and snapped in the wind, each emblazoned with the red dragon that was the emblem of the Vitalini—the family of Vortigern and his sons—again and again along the way. On they marched until they came out of the northeastern gate to one of the vast cemeteries outside the city walls. Here the dignitaries gathered, sometime allies and enemies of the dead man, to see him buried. The body lay on a bier in the soft drizzle, a perfectly unremarkable figure clothed in white robes, impeccably shaven and coiffured in death.

The Bishop of Londinium read a short passage, then a poet gave an oration. Eldol found it oddly moving. He was there with the prefect of the garrison from Glevum, who seemed to know Londinium and its leading figures quite well.

‘That fellow there is the magistrate for Corinium, just down the road from Glevum. And that thin fellow with the big ears is Anblaud, from Ariconium. That's where the iron mines are. Are you listening, sir? You'll be having dealings with these fellows before long.’

‘Yes, of course.’ Eldol tugged at the fastenings of his armour, which was too small for him and very uncomfortable. All the other consiliars were dressed in the formal uniforms of their office. He felt very foolish. ‘How do you know all these people, prefect?’

‘From the war against Ambrosius. They backed the right side. You do remember the war, don't you, sir?’

‘Of course.’

‘Only asking, sir. Now there's a fellow from the other side: you see that young fellow there with the blue cloak? His father fought for the enemy. Vortigern let him keep his lands as a sort of compensation for his father being executed. Bought him off with his own coin, you might say.’

Soon after the ceremony a handsome silver-haired man approached.

‘You are Eldol?’ he said, offering his hand. ‘My name is Elaphius; I'm the magistrate for Verulamium. My condolences on your recent loss.’

‘Thank you. Did you know my father?’

Elaphius nodded and smiled distractedly.

‘Oh yes... he was a good man. Loyal. I trust you had a good journey from Glevum?’

Eldol opened his mouth, but Elaphius cut him off.

‘There will be an assembly of the Consilium in an hour’s time, at the basilica. Do you know where that is? Just a brief, informal meeting, given the sad circumstances. I’ll see you there, then? Good. Afraid I must hurry. Delighted to have met you.’

The man gave Eldol’s hand a final shake and then disappeared into the crowd.

‘Do you know who that was?’ said Eldol to the prefect.

‘Not him. Do you really know where the basilica is?’

‘No.’

‘We passed it on the way here. Never mind, sir. I’ll show you.’

This meeting was held in a small semicircular room off to the side of the nave in the basilica. It was very warm in there. Tiered benches of dark polished wood were built into the wall, and there was a lone seat on a dais facing them. In front of the seat was a table covered in papers. Eldol was shown to a bench where he found himself sitting next to another consiliar.

‘Ah,’ said this grey and unimposing man. ‘You must be the new magistrate for Glevum. Have you just come from a parade?’

‘A parade?’ said Eldol. ‘Oh, my armour... I was told to wear this by the prefect of the garrison.’ The man looked at him uncomprehendingly. ‘Yes, we’ve had a parade, in Glevum. I came at short notice. I rode here... on a horse...’ He was gaping wordlessly now, and the man looked at him as if he were mad. ‘I’m sorry, it’s been a long day. My name is Eldol.’

There was a pause.

‘Balatus, from Venta Belgarum.’

‘Where they breed the fighting dogs?’

‘Best fighting dogs in the world,’ said Balatus, less guardedly. Eldol had evidently said the right thing. ‘So you’re Nereus’s son, then? I was awfully sad to hear he’d passed away.’

‘Thank you.’

‘This’ll be your first time at a Consilium meeting, eh? This one’ll be more interesting than most, I’ll bet. Hengest has sent a message with Britu’s body. He wants to meet with us.’

‘I’ve only just heard of this Hengest recently.’

‘Good lord, you have led a sheltered life, haven’t you?’ said Balatus. ‘You might have wondered why half the soldiers in the west marched through your lands to fight him before now. There’s some of his men here right now, in Londinium, if you please! Bloody heathens. Animals, *worse* than animals...’

III

Ordlaf Hunlafing, the thane who had delivered Britu's body back to his people, sat on a bench in the main room of this building. The size of the place unnerved him. He found himself keeping as still as he could in order to avert the thunderous echoes that followed even the slightest footstep or creak of boot leather, and he watched the guards who stood by every arch and doorway. They seemed to be trying to pretend the visitors were not there.

Ordlaf had come with two of the younger men under his command, neither of them yet twenty years old. Their names were Beadda and Arwald. He had chosen them not because they were the best, but only because they had nagged and begged him more than the others. Neither had ever been outside Hengest's lands before. All the way to this *waelisc* city, they were giddy with excitement.

When they came within sight of the place, however, they each reacted in different ways. Beadda, a loud and ebullient character, became still louder and more ebullient. He was a thickset boy with skin and hair of almost exactly the same shade of red. Arwald was tall, blond and pale. His beard so far only amounted to a little patch of coarse hair tucked under the point of his chin, but he cultivated it with impatient pride. He was usually almost as excitable as Beadda, but at the sight of the red tiled roofs and gleaming walls he grew quiet. It was as though he shared Ordlaf's instinctive dread of the place.

They had come on horseback, followed on foot by slaves who carried Britu's body between them. The Briton who served as their interpreter rode ahead. About half a mile out from the city they had reined in, and soldiers came out to meet them in frightening numbers. The interpreter spoke to their prefect and then translated what was said to Ordlaf. The visitors were to remain within the city until after the burial. Ordlaf was in no position to refuse.

The soldiers had given them lodgings at the fort in the northwest corner of the city, and there they had remained until today. Hardly a moment had passed since their arrival when they were not watched by murderous-eyed soldiers, except for when they slept. Even then there was always a guard outside the door. Ordlaf was sick with worry.

Now they were waiting for someone to take their interpreter to speak before the assembly. They had been waiting there for about an hour already. Beadda was getting restless.

'Have you ever seen anything like this?' he said to no one in particular. He was whispering but his words still boomed and echoed in that cavernous space. The basilica dwarfed their king's house, the biggest building Beadda had seen until today.

'Yes,' said Ordlaf.

'I don't like it,' said Arwald quietly. 'I don't like that we've been here so long. I don't like that they took our weapons from us, either.'

‘Well, we did kill Vortigern’s son.’

Arwald recoiled.

‘Beadda, keep your voice down!’

‘What for? They saw us bring the body. Besides, they can’t understand what we’re saying.’

It was true that the guards had not stirred from their positions.

‘Just be quiet, Beadda,’ said Ordlafl.

Beadda obeyed the thane’s command for as long as he could, and then he seemed to forget all about it. ‘Was this what our town was like when you first got there, Ordlafl? It’s not in such a good way now, is it?’

‘By Thunor,’ Arwald muttered to himself. ‘Does he ever shut up?’

‘There’s nothing wrong with our town,’ said Ordlafl.

‘But all the roofs have fallen in, and the lanes are all covered in—’

‘It was like that when we got there. Be quiet, Beadda.’

Beadda was quiet again, but it lasted only a few moments this time.

‘Still, just look at this place. Say what you like about the *waelisc*, but they do know how to build things. Just look at it, all that stone. The best things we can come up with are like little shepherd’s huts next to this.’

‘Beadda,’ said Ordlafl, beginning to lose his temper, ‘the Romans built this hall, not the Britons. They’ve got nothing of their own. They’re like ticks feeding in the ears of oxen!’ He caught the withering eye of the interpreter, who sat further up the bench from them, and flushed. ‘Well, I didn’t mean *you*, Corotic. You’re like one of our own now.’

The interpreter turned away, and shivered. He was a bony old man with a permanent frown and an impressive repertoire of tics and fidgets. The Jutes hardly ever saw him around their town, though they were reasonably sure that he lived there. He only appeared when Hengest had dealings with the natives outside of his kingdom.

There was the clang and creak of doors being unlocked somewhere up ahead, and a silver-haired man stepped into the nave. The interpreter stood to meet him.

‘Elaphius.’

‘Corotic,’ the silver-haired man said. ‘It’s good to see you again. How are things in Cantia?’

‘Tense. It has been a hard couple of years for everyone. How did Vortigern take the bad news?’

‘Better than I would have, had it been my son. I’m afraid he is no stranger to grief.’

‘Nor is my master Hengest.’

‘I’m sure. Well, would you like to come into the hall now? We’re just getting started. Vortigern should be joining us very soon.’ He gave a nod to the men on the bench. ‘Corotic, I think it might be best all round if your friends were to wait here in the nave. Emotions are still running rather high.’

‘Understood.’ The interpreter turned to the others and spoke to them in their own language. ‘You wait here.’ Elaphius took him by the arm and led him into the shadows behind the columns. The unseen doors clanged shut again.

‘Did you hear that?’ said Ordlafl. ‘Did you hear him barking orders at me? Twitching little *waelisc* rat!’

‘I don’t think he was barking orders at you,’ said Beadda. ‘Or at least I don’t think he meant to. Our ways are strange to him.’

‘Don’t you believe it. Hengest should put him out to work in the fields with the rest of his kind.’

‘Oh, he’s not so bad.’

But Ordlaaf was not to be swayed.

‘And another thing. Look, I’ll show you. Take out your knife, Beadda.’

‘My knife?’

‘Do as I say, boy.’

Beadda drew a long, single-edged dagger from his belt.

‘Yes?’

‘What do you see? Look at the handle.’

Runes were scratched into the wood of the hilt.

‘It’s got my name on it.’

‘That’s just it. You wrote it on there yourself, didn’t you? It’s right there in our own runes. The Britons don’t have their own runes. Everything they write must be in the Roman language, and only the cleverest among them can read. Every last one of our free men back home can read our runes, can they not?’

‘Beadda,’ said Arwald. The guards were now looking back at them with grim interest. ‘Beadda, I think you should put your knife away...’

IV

Balatus had still not stopped talking.

Eldol had heard the same kind of noise from the old soldiers when, as a young man, he used to sneak into the drinking holes of Glevum. Much of it was war talk, as blunt as a brick wall and about as sophisticated. But then Eldol made the mistake of mentioning how disease had been rife in the Glevum slums over the last year, which set Balatus off rambling about the effects of the plague in Venta Belgarum.

‘You wouldn’t believe the smell. The weather has made it so much worse. And every day there are more of them turning up at the curia, trying to get another handout. They’re too sick to work, they say, so now I’ve got no one to work the fields. If they’re not dying, they’re sneaking off in the middle of the night to start a new life in another town. I’m told a man can make a good living as a beggar in Glevum, for instance. You’d know all about that, I’m sure.’

Eldol was only half-listening by now.

‘Oh, yes. Who’s that coming in with Elaphius?’

The doors at the back of the dais opened as Elaphius and Corotic were seated. A man in an ornate breastplate similar to Eldol’s came out and filled up the room with his great booming voice.

‘All rise for the head of the Consilium!’

The consiliars got to their feet. The speaker stepped back, and in walked the *de facto* ruler of southern Britannia, waving everyone back to their seats with a modest smile.

Vortigern was not at all how Eldol had pictured him. The name he had heard so often over the years had such a forbidding sound. He had half expected to see some laurel-wreathed demigod ride in on a warhorse. What he saw was a rather gaunt, white-haired old man with a kindly face, dressed just like the consiliars. Eldol could not help but feel disappointed.

‘It is to be a brief session today, friends,’ said Vortigern, taking the seat on the dais. ‘We are pressed for time, things being as they are. Remember, though, we have the next official assembly at the start of next month, so if there is anything we don’t get around to today, there will be ample opportunity to bring it up then. So...’ He looked at the papers on the desk in front of him. ‘As usual, the house will hear only questions that have been submitted in advance, and today it seems we have only two topics to cover. The first question is from Elaphius, the second from Latratus. So, Elaphius, please begin.’

Elaphius rose from his seat.

‘Thank you, my lord. As I am sure most of the house will know by now, my question concerns a proposed meeting between the Consilium and Hengest, the leader of the Jutish community settled in Cantia. Now, Hengest has sent a representative to speak on his behalf

today, and if there are no objections, he will speak now.'

Vortigern glanced around the room.

'Are there any objections?'

No one answered.

'Very well. Would the representative make himself known to the house?'

The man who had come in with Elaphius stood, shivering slightly as he did so.

'I am Corotic, from the town of Durovernum. I come firstly to offer my condolences to all present upon the death of Britu. We are saddened to hear of his passing in Cantia, and we pray for his soul night and day. I come also to request that the Consilium meet with my master Hengest in two weeks' time, to discuss how affairs stand since the recent end of hostilities.'

'Of course,' said Vortigern. 'Our door is always open to Hengest. The next assembly will be at the start of next month, and he is more than welcome to attend.'

'Your pardon, my lord,' said Corotic, 'but I'm afraid that won't do. Hengest knows well that the campaign of your sadly departed son against his people had support from some among the Consilium. He believes that if he were to enter Londinium, he would not come out alive. Hengest proposes that the Consilium should meet with him, without soldiers or guards, without weapons of any kind, at the location of his choosing. The venue will remain undisclosed to the Consilium until five days before the meeting.'

The hall was at once filled with outraged cries. Vortigern held up his hand, and silence fell. He pointed at one of the consiliars and nodded.

'Who is this man to issue demands?' said the consiliar. 'How dare he accuse us of treachery?'

'I do not accuse,' said Corotic. 'Nor do I issue demands. I merely request, on behalf of a man who wishes to make peace and right wrongs.'

Vortigern pointed at another consiliar, the one the prefect had named earlier as Anblaud.

'I understand Hengest's position,' said Anblaud. 'But he's got to understand ours too. It's too much to ask that we meet him with no protection. You say he fears he might be murdered. Fine. But some among us might have the same worry, and with some justification. What guarantees can you give us?'

'None,' said Corotic. 'Only my king's word. You all know him to be an honourable man.'

'We know him to be a heathen!' shouted another consiliar. 'A worshipper of devils!'

Vortigern held up his hand again and fixed the speaker with a stony look.

'Any man who speaks out of turn again will be removed from the hall. That is the only warning I shall give. In any case, I have heard enough. I know Hengest to be an honourable man. The Consilium will meet Hengest at any venue he chooses. Any of those here present may attend, provided they attend unarmed. Anyone who feels his safety may be compromised is free to stay at home. Is this satisfactory, Corotic?'

Hengest's spokesman bowed deeply.

'You are wise and gracious, my lord. Hengest has a true and valuable friend in you.'

'You're welcome,' said Vortigern, looking faintly embarrassed. 'Now, let us move on. We have a question from Latratus.'

Another consiliar stood.

'Thank you, my lord. Certain rumours have come to my attention of late. They say the

Bishop of Altisiodorum is back in the country. In recent months there have been sightings of him in the south and west. I wish to ask if anyone here has knowledge of his current whereabouts, and if there are any plans for his arrest.'

'Arrest?' said Vortigern. 'On what grounds?'

'Well... we all remember how much trouble he caused the last time he was here. Things are even more precarious now than they were then, and—'

Vortigern interrupted him.

'What do you mean, "precarious"?''

'Well, I mean to say... one cannot deny that there are certain divisions, my lord. The lower classes are liable to be stirred up against us, what with the plague and the lack of money coming into the country...'

'My dear friend,' said Vortigern, 'can you imagine how much more trouble would be stirred up if I arbitrarily ordered the arrest of the most powerful cleric this side of the Alps? Doubtless he has been sent here again by the Bishop of Roma. Perhaps even the Imperial family have had a hand in it. It doesn't matter. Whatever his business is here, we can do nothing unless he commits a crime. Does anyone here know the bishop's whereabouts?'

There was not a sound in the room. Vortigern chuckled.

'Oh, I can't believe *nobody* knows where he is. But then again, you have more to fear from the bishop than you do from me. I cannot commit your souls to hell, after all! No, it is down to those of us who remember the last time to be vigilant. Latratus, tell us what you have heard in detail. Leave nothing out.'

Eldol tried to follow what was being said, but it was very warm in the hall, and the long ride from Glevum was catching up with him. Before long he was asleep. He woke up again with a jolt and sat up as straight as he could, but it was no use. His chin sank slowly to rest upon his collarbone and his eyelids drooped. When he awoke again, it was to the noise of the other consiliars getting out of their seats. Vortigern had already left the hall. Balatus leaned over and spoke to Eldol, cheerfully and perhaps knowingly.

'So how did you like your first assembly?'

'Oh, yes,' said Eldol, fighting off a yawn. 'Some interesting points raised. So I suppose I'll see you at the meeting with Hengest then?'

'Not a chance. If anything interesting happens, you can fill me in at the next assembly. I won't be going near those barbarians without an armed guard.'

The doors opened, and the consiliars began to file out into the nave. There they were confronted with the sight of three corpses. Arwald was face-down in a pool of dark blood on the tiles. Ordlafr was headless. The bones of Beadda's forearms were splintered near the wrists, one hand severed, the other hanging on by slack rags of skin and flesh. He must have tried to fend off the wounds that had killed him.

The guards stood over the destroyed bodies with drawn swords, panting like dogs. Elaphius was dumbstruck. Corotic gasped for breath and sank to his haunches in a shivering ball. The guards realised that they had made a grave mistake, and looked accordingly troubled.

'What in God's name...' Elaphius cried. 'What has happened? What have you done?'

'One of them drew a knife, my lord,' said one of the guards.

'So you *killed* them? These men were under our protection! Report at once to the fort, all

of you. Mark my words, I'll have your heads for this.'

The guards slinked away. Elaphius pulled Corotic to his feet and led him back into the room where the assembly had taken place, pushing past the other consiliars. He sat the interpreter down and ordered one of the ushers to fetch some water.

'Corotic, I cannot begin to find the words...'

The interpreter coughed, shaking like a drunkard, and lifted his head to look at Elaphius.

'Do you see now why my king won't come here?'

The usher came with some water, and Corotic gulped it down noisily.

'You're right,' said Elaphius. 'I understand perfectly. Needless to say, the Consilium will gladly take care of funeral arrangements at its own expense.'

'You will do no such thing! Their families will send them to their gods according to their customs.' Corotic stood, struggling with the spasms that racked his body. 'I will ride back to my master tonight and tell him what has happened; that his chief thane is dead, along with two good fighting men, for no reason at all. Have the bodies cleaned and sent back to us there.'

Elaphius nodded.

'As you wish. And I promise you that the men who did this will be duly punished in the morning.'

Corotic reeled out into the nave again, past the bodies and the gawping crowd.

There were perhaps twenty men between Eldol and the pitiful scene, but he was taller than they were and he could see everything. He felt cold. He had seen corpses before, but not like this. The urge to leave Londinium and make for home was almost overwhelming.

V

The garrison could not afford to throw away soldiers, so Elaphius did not fulfil his promise to Corotic. The guards were assigned unpleasant and demeaning tasks for the next six months, and the matter was considered closed.

The ride home to Glevum was long and silent. Eldol remained withdrawn for a long time thereafter. People bothered him with papers to approve, and he agreed to everything they said without really hearing them. It was what was expected of him. He presided absently over a murder trial (he found the accused not guilty, largely because he had an honest face), then went to bed, where he lay awake in the suffocating heat.

Glevum ran by itself. Refugees from Venta Belgarum, fleeing the plague that was devastating their town, arrived at the gates. They brought with them the news that Balatus was dead from the disease, and Eldol felt a fatuous guilt for having disliked the man. The refugees were turned away.

Try as he might, Eldol could not get over what had happened in the Londinium basilica. Surely he ought to reserve all his sorrow for the mourning of his father, but memories of blood and splintered limbs plagued his brief forays into sleep. He was lonely too, since his friends seemed to be avoiding him lately. Perhaps they were leaving him to grieve. Perhaps they were put off by the fact that he now had the right, in theory at least, to have them beheaded any time he liked. Glevum grew more stifling with every passing day.

One afternoon, the prefect of the garrison came to Eldol's bedroom with a letter. The time and place for the meeting with Hengest was set. For some reason this brightened Eldol up a little.

'It's at Ambrosius's fort on the Kalends of May, sir,' said the prefect. 'That's three days from today.'

'You mean... *the* fort?'

'Yes. Hengest has chosen the venue well, sir. We'd better get your armour ready, eh?'

'Oh, no, prefect. There'll be no weapons or armour. There won't even be any soldiers there.'

'No soldiers?'

'No, they were quite clear about that. Hengest is afraid of being murdered. I don't think I can even bring you along.'

The prefect looked hurt.

'If you say so, sir. Do you know how to get there?'

'Actually, no.'

'Not to worry. I'll write down the itinerary for... oh... perhaps a map would be better?'

Eldol deflated. He had not been ashamed of his illiteracy before he became a magistrate. It was common enough among his generation; he and his friends had always said that reading was for priests and politicians. They had been a little shortsighted, perhaps.

‘A map will be fine. Thank you.’

Eldol set out for the fort three days later. He found his way easily enough, thanks to the prefect’s map, but he felt like a fool every time he consulted it. In lieu of any writing, the prefect had drawn a little picture of something more or less homonymous with each place name.

From the road it hardly looked like a fort at all. It was only when Eldol drew closer that he saw the earthworks carved into the hill and the wooden stockade at the top, and it took him a while to find his way to the entrance. The stockade was rotten from years of abandonment to the wind and rain. Inside were the black skeletons of buildings burnt down long ago. Tents were pitched among the ruins, and Eldol could hear voices and sounds of activity coming from within. Out in the open, some workmen were setting up tables while others unloaded crates and barrels from carts. Upon seeing Eldol, they redoubled their efforts, and their foreman approached him.

‘My lord Elaphius?’

‘No, my name’s Eldol.’

‘Oh... well, none of the other consiliars have arrived yet, sir. Shall I stable your horse for you? I’ll have the lads fetch you a drink while you wait.’

Eldol was seated at one of the tables, and before long the workmen seemed to forget he was there. They took more time in their work, and a few of them took a break to gamble over a game of dice. Eldol felt a nagging desire to ask if he could join their game. They would probably feel compelled to let him win, even though they were only playing for pebbles.

The other consiliars began to turn up, and they too were seated at the tables with a wide space between each. Each consiliar would sit next to one of Hengest’s thanes, in order to encourage a convivial atmosphere.

Vortigern arrived with no announcement or fanfare, followed by Elaphius, and both took seats close to Eldol. The head of the Consilium gently shrugged off those who rushed to ask him if he had had a pleasant journey, and he motioned to an attendant to fetch him a drink. Little more than half of the consiliars whom Eldol had seen in Londinium were present, and the sky was already beginning to darken. The others had noticed too. They exchanged pleasantries in voices too loud and too laden with good humour to be natural, with smiles stretched too tautly across the teeth to be real.

Then the Jutes arrived, and Eldol knew at once which one must be Hengest. The prefect had said he looked like a walking corpse, and it was true. His face was like a skull dipped in wax and dried in the sun, the overlarge eyes set so deep in the sockets that they appeared to have no lids. The thick hair that fell around his shoulders might have given a look of vitality to another man, but it only served to accentuate by contrast the deathliness of Hengest’s face.

Vortigern and Hengest embraced like brothers who had not seen each other for many years: stiff and awkward, shrinking away as they came together. Still, Eldol was amazed that any embrace was possible between them. How much must one sacrifice of one’s own self to play at the table of statesmen and kings?

The Jutes sat down among the consiliars, whom they outnumbered by about two to one.

Eldol had always pictured them as gigantic figures with golden hair and piercing blue eyes, hairy as wolves and wild as the sea. But apart from their moustaches and the cross-garters on their legs, they did not look much different from rural Britons. One of them, a ginger-bearded fellow with squinting eyes, sat down to Eldol's left with a shy smile.

'Sigeferth is mín nama,' he said, thumping himself in the chest.

'I'm Eldol.' He returned the smile, and they shook hands. That was as far as the conversation went. Eldol turned to his right, where another Jutish thane sat. This was a grey-bearded, one-eyed man who looked so thoroughly sinister that Eldol did not dare speak to him.

After everyone was seated, Vortigern stood and held up his hand for silence.

'Today marks the end of a long and terrible sadness,' he said. *'For the last few years there has been a growing rift between us, the citizens of Britannia, and our cousins from across the sea. There has been mistrust and hatred, misunderstanding and fear. It has pitted friend against friend, and father against son.'* He paused at this allusion to his own grief and lowered his eyes. *'Every man here has lost comrades. Many of us have lost kin. My good friend Hengest and I have both felt the spectre of death sweep through our households, snatching from us those whom we loved most.'*

He raised his eyes again.

'This madness has left our homeland in danger. All of Povia is already lost to the Scoti. Years ago they would raid our coastal towns only now and again, and in numbers too small to do lasting damage. Now they have their men stationed on our own soil, in the very heart of our land, and not a month passes without another outrage being committed against our people. Yet for the last two years our countrymen's swords have been pointed to the east, towards those who have been our allies for so long. Today this ends. Today a new bridge will be built across the rift, and the citizens of Britannia will embrace the Jutes once more as brothers.'

He paused again, and the consiliars applauded. The Jutes followed suit, though they could not have understood what was said. Vortigern held up his hand again and silence fell.

'I realise you must all be hungry, so I will not make this any longer than it need be.' A murmur of polite laughter followed this. *'I hear your stomachs rumbling, and the food will be ready soon. Now, as you will all have noticed, many of our consiliars have chosen not to attend tonight. I urge you all not to think less of them for this. We must seek to change their minds, not to run roughshod over them. To all who have come here tonight, I extend my deepest gratitude. Your loyalty and wisdom keep my hopes for the future alive. Thank you.'*

Vortigern sat down and applause erupted again from the tables, thunderously this time. Soon afterwards the meeting began in earnest. The consiliars and thanes did the best they could to get around the language barrier, and everyone seemed to be getting along well. It looked like there really might be some hope for the future.

Less than an hour later, nearly all of the consiliars were dead.

VI

Eldol sat down on the damp grass and tried to collect his thoughts.

He had no idea where he was or how he had got there, but from the ache in the small of his back and the blood thundering in his temples, he was reasonably certain that he was still alive. It was dark and cold. He could see the stars and the clouds overhead, and when he turned to look behind him, he saw an orange glow picking out the line of the horizon. Then he noticed Vortigern lying on the ground next to him—whether sleeping or dead, he did not know—and the memory of what had happened began slowly to inch back into his mind.

‘I don’t believe it,’ he whispered to himself. ‘We’re done for.’

At the sound of his voice, Vortigern stirred on the grass.

‘Who is that?’ he groaned.

‘Eldol, my lord, from Glevum. I managed to get us out of there somehow.’

Vortigern slowly sat up.

‘Eldol... yes, I know you, you’re Nereus’s son. What has happened?’

‘They’re all dead, my lord,’ said Eldol, fighting back tears as his body shook. ‘The Jutes killed them all. I think we’re the only ones left alive.’

Eldol could not see Vortigern’s face, but he knew that the jolt of memory must be hitting him now. The recollection of Hengest pinning him face-down against the table, hissing into his ear in heavily-accented Britannic, perhaps close enough to smell his breath and feel the bristles of his chin. The words had been loud enough even for Eldol to hear.

‘This was not my doing,’ Hengest had said, while a wave of Jutish warriors surged into the fort, cutting down the consiliars as they rose from their seats and tried to flee.

Vortigern spoke now in the darkness.

‘The Consilium. They’re all dead. Hengest betrayed us.’

Vortigern and Hengest had been talking quite freely at the meeting, and they had not tiptoed around their grievances. Most of the talk was of rebuilding ties, of turning the combined strength of the Britons and the Jutes against the Scoti in the west.

Then the air was filled with shouts and screams, and the sound of metal on wood. More Jutes were rushing in from all sides. They surrounded the consiliars with swords that gleamed orange in the firelight. Hengest was on his feet, holding Vortigern down and shouting instructions to his men at the tables.

‘*Nimed eure seaxes!*’ he roared. ‘*Nimed eure seaxes!*’

Eldol did not speak a word of the Jutes’ language, but he had understood. Hengest was telling them to draw their knives.

‘Their knives,’ Vortigern said now in the darkness as he remembered. ‘We never thought

about their knives. The Jutes always wear them in their belts.'

Eldol had killed a man. Perhaps more than one; he could not be sure. It had all happened so quickly. At Hengest's instruction, the man to Eldol's left (the one who had introduced himself as Sigeferth) drew his knife from his belt. Without thinking, Eldol grabbed Sigeferth by the wrists and overpowered him. Then he took the knife and stabbed Sigeferth again and again until he stopped moving. There was blood everywhere.

Afterwards he found himself standing in front of the table where Hengest was pinning down Vortigern. He had found a broken piece of wood from somewhere and was holding it like a club. A table leg, that was it. He hit Hengest with the table leg perhaps four or five times before he went down, and then he gathered up Vortigern in his arms and ran out the fort.

By some miracle he made it past the Jutish swordsmen, striking them down left and right with the table leg as he made for the gap in the stockade. He carried Vortigern down through the ditches, ducking into the scrub every time he heard a noise. He could still hear the screams of the consiliars, the battle-cries of the barbarians and the crackle of burning wood above him.

The Jutes must have been out there in the ditches looking for them, but somehow Eldol managed to evade them. Then he lurched blindly across the plain, away from the road and the river, only stopping when exhaustion made it impossible to go further. For the moment, though, they were safe.

'I never expected treachery from Hengest,' said Vortigern. 'I was a good friend to him, Eldol. When my sons attacked his lands, I didn't take their side. Every man in the Consilium would have gladly sent his soldiers into Cantia, but I held them back.'

'Then why has he done it, my lord?'

Vortigern sighed heavily.

'Hrothwyn. It must be that. Tonight was the first time I had seen Hengest since Hrothwyn died. He is not the same man anymore.'

'Who was Hrothwyn?'

Vortigern said nothing for a while, and when he did speak again his voice was unsteady.

'Hrothwyn was my wife, and Hengest's daughter. My sons drove her to suicide with their madness.' Eldol began to sputter an apology but Vortigern interrupted him. The quaver was gone from his voice now. 'Where are we, my friend? I am afraid my senses deserted me in that madness back there.'

'I'm not sure, my lord. We can't be more than a couple of miles from the fort. I carried you over my shoulder, running all the way. My horse is still in there. All my money too, so I don't know what we'll do.'

Vortigern laughed. It was an ugly, jarring sound.

'By God, you're a rare fellow! You carried me all that way? I am indebted to you, my boy, eternally indebted. If I only had a hundred men like you... But all is not lost, I think. We must consider our options. We certainly can't go to Sorviodunum; it's been deserted for years now, and it's undoubtedly where the heathens must have camped before the ambush. If we are still near the fort, though, then it will be more or less a straight walk east to Venta Belgarum. We will be safe there.'

'Venta Belgarum's no good, my lord. The whole town is dying of plague.'

‘Then we shall go elsewhere. Besides, they will be looking for us on the roads, so we would be safer going across the plain. Our best chance then would be... let me think... Aquae Sulis, to the northwest of here.’

Eldol felt a dim glow of hope at this.

‘I have a friend who lives in Aquae Sulis,’ he said. ‘He can give us a place to stay. Then from there we can get to Glevum, and we’ll be safe. The defences are strong in Glevum, my lord. Once we’re there, we can get word to Elaphius, and perhaps he can send help.’

‘No,’ said Vortigern. ‘Elaphius is dead. I saw him die. I think Glevum is a good place to regroup, however. A fine town, one of the best in the country.’

‘Thank you, my lord. Then as soon as the sun begins to rise we’ll be able to set off?’

‘The sun is rising, over there.’ Vortigern pointed to the smudge of orange light on the horizon.

‘That isn’t the sunrise, my lord. It’s the fort. They were setting it alight just as we were getting out of there.’

‘Animals,’ said Vortigern, hoarsely and after a long pause. ‘Worse than animals. Then there’s nothing we can do for the moment. There’s no point in stumbling around in the dark. We should try to get some sleep.’

They lay down on the grass with only their cloaks to shield them from the cold. Neither of them ever came close to falling asleep. Too much had happened for that. Instead they lay very still, and notions of time grew weak and distant. Finally the sky grew a little lighter, and when an angry red sun hovered just over the mist, they got to their feet again. Vortigern pointed to the sun with his right hand, then in another direction with his left.

‘That is more or less northwest, over there.’

They set off across the plain, keeping their eyes on the horizon. Hours passed without a word being spoken. As the morning went on it grew warmer, and they picked up speed. After midday they came to a broad river, and they followed it upstream to a stone bridge grown over with grass.

‘I know where we are,’ said Vortigern. ‘This is the River Abona. We are well on our way.’

They crossed the bridge. By now it had grown very hot and they both felt drained. They sat down on the riverbank for a while, cupping their hands to drink the water, while insects buzzed around them.

‘Is this water clean, my lord?’ said Eldol.

‘I don’t know,’ said Vortigern. ‘But if we don’t drink it we won’t get much further in this heat. How are your feet holding up?’

‘Very sore, my lord. I’m trying not to think about it.’

‘A wise policy, I think. We have certainly covered some distance today. Don’t drink it too fast, Eldol, you’ll make yourself ill.’

‘Sorry, my lord.’

‘Yes, some distance... do you know, you look just like your father. Even if you are twice the size he was.’

‘Did you know him well, my lord?’

‘Oh yes, Eldol. He was a valuable friend to me in the war against Ambrosius, and afterwards. A very clever politician.’

Eldol frowned. 'I never saw that side of him, my lord. I knew nothing about his work until he was dead and the tribunes at Glevum were pushing me into his place. To be honest with you, I don't have a clue what I'm doing.'

'My dear boy... If you tackle your work the way you tackled those murderers at the fort, then Glevum will prosper like never before! I've never seen such bravery. What you did back there will be talked about for generations, mark my words.'

Eldol had noticed that Vortigern had a habit of speaking as though he were in front of an audience. There was no harm in it, perhaps, but it made everything he said sound a little hollow.

'Thank you, my lord. I'm not sure that bravery comes into it, though. I mean... It's almost like I went mad in there. I'd never killed a man before.'

'And how do you feel about it?'

'I don't know, my lord. It hasn't had enough time to... well, to seem real.'

'It's no small thing to kill a man, but you had no choice. Now you will have all the time in the world to contemplate it, my boy, but while we are still in danger there is only the matter at hand. Am I right?'

Eldol wondered if Vortigern had ever killed anyone. It was hard to imagine him doing it, but who could know?

'Exactly right, my lord.'

'So, tell me about your friend.'

'Which friend?'

'Your friend in Aquae Sulis. The one you're taking us to.'

'Oh, Rocatos? He's almost like a cousin, really. I haven't seen him for a while. He has a big house right in the centre of the town, near the bath houses. He lives there with his sister.'

'Oh? And what does he do in Aquae Sulis?'

'Not very much, my lord, if truth be told. His father used to be a merchant there, but there isn't much business for him in Aquae Sulis anymore. He used to import olive oil and pottery and things. He's over in Gallia now, I think, so Rocatos and his sister look after the house for him. Aquae Sulis can still be a good place to live, if you have enough...' Eldol trailed off momentarily. 'My lord, was there a magistrate from Aquae Sulis at the meeting?'

'No. I did not expect him to come.' Vortigern thought for a moment. 'Anblaud was not there... nor was Glivis, nor Erbin or Marcian... there were so many. I cannot assume that they are traitors, though. If they avoided the meeting for fear of losing their lives then they were quite right to do so. But then I cannot risk counting on their loyalty either. We are in a tight spot indeed.' He tapped Eldol on the arm and pointed to something further along the riverbank. 'Eldol, what is that over there? My eyes are not what they used to be.'

Eldol looked and saw a figure lying down among the reeds about a hundred yards upriver of them.

'There's someone there, my lord. I think he's sleeping, or dead.'

'Is he a fisherman?'

'I don't know. I'll go and have a look.'

Eldol got to his feet and walked up the bank. He saw that the figure was a young boy, dozing in the sun, and that he did indeed have a fishing rod beside him. He turned back to Vortigern and nodded. The old man got to his feet and joined Eldol. The boy continued to

slumber amongst the rushes, snoring softly as his line swayed with the breeze. Vortigern put a finger to his lips and then pointed to the net that rested just below the surface of the water next to the young fisherman.

Shortly afterwards they found themselves in a sparse wood a little way north of the river, laughing like children, carrying a net full of stolen fish between them.

‘The boy has caught some beauties here,’ said Vortigern, sitting down on the ground. ‘I hope he catches more when he wakes up, or his father will beat him! Shall we get these cooked up?’

‘Do you know how to start a fire, my lord?’ said Eldol.

‘Of course I do. Don’t you?’

‘No, my lord.’

‘Then it is high time you learnt. Do you still have your knife with you?’

‘Yes, my lord, it’s right here.’

‘Excellent. Right, first I’ll need you to gather some wood. Try to get as many different kinds as you can, hard and soft. Don’t bring any green wood; it won’t burn. Also, I’ll need a good sharp stone if you can find one.’

Vortigern got the fire going before long, and he directed Eldol to behead and gut the fish for cooking. They skewered the wet slices of fish on sticks in front of the fire and sat down to rest.

‘It has been a long time since I cooked a meal like this,’ said Vortigern. ‘In fact it’s been years since I last cooked anything at all.’

‘I never have, my lord,’ said Eldol. ‘I think we’ll enjoy it, though, no matter how it turns out.’

‘You are right there. I don’t think I’ve ever looked forward to a meal so much! It’s a good thing you still had that knife.’

Eldol looked down at the heavy single-edged dagger in his hands. Runes were scratched into the handle, and the blood of its previous owner was still encrusted in the grooves.

‘I hope we make it safely to Glevum, my lord.’

‘We will. I daresay you have a wife you want to get back to, eh? Some children, perhaps?’

‘There’s only my brother, my lord.’

‘No doubt the poor fellow is worried about you.’ Vortigern sighed. ‘I am looking forward to seeing my son, myself.’ Eldol looked up at him, surprised. ‘Oh, yes. There is still one left who has yet to turn against me. Mind you, he is only thirteen years old.’

‘Where is he?’

‘Right now he is at a country house that Elaphius owns—I should say *owned*, God rest his soul—near Verulamium. The idea was to leave him there while I straightened out this mess with Hengest. He has not been right lately, the poor boy. Not since Hrothwyn died. His real mother, my first wife, died giving birth to him. Everyone said that she was too old to have children. It turned out they were right. I married Hrothwyn when he was very small, so she was the only mother he ever really knew. He has taken her death badly. Now all this has happened as well, it seems there is no end to the poor boy’s troubles.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Pascent,’ said Vortigern, smiling fondly. ‘He’s a fine boy, you’ll see. You’ll meet him

when all this is over. Pass me one of those pieces of fish, Eldol. I'll see if it's cooked through.'

The fish looked and smelt very good, with beads of sticky fat bubbling on the surface. They wolfed the food down noisily, paying no attention to the grease that smeared on their fingers and cheeks as they ate. Eldol thought it was the best meal he had ever tasted. Right after they had finished eating, they both crashed into a very deep sleep. Nightmares took hold of Eldol.

He was in Ambrosius's fort again, but this time it was already on fire. He was surrounded by Jutish warriors, all bloody and mutilated like the bodies he had seen in the basilica at Londinium. They were dragging themselves across the ground towards him with swords in their hands, bleeding from their ears and empty eye sockets, moaning voicelessly through gaping mouths. Among them were wolves and wild dogs, and creatures that Eldol had never seen or imagined before. A smell of smoke and decay hung over everything.

Hengest was there again, transformed into a grinning half-skeleton with eyes of fire, with beetles and little spiders running up and down the spare festering flesh of his arms. In the dream it was not Vortigern that he was pinning down against the table, but Eldol's father. He called out Eldol's name, childishly plaintive in his fear, his voice weak, buried under the oppressive, deafening blank noise. It was as though Eldol were hearing everything from under water.

Eldol fought the skeleton-Hengest, striking him again and again in the face with the table leg. He struck him as hard as he could but it had no effect. The terrible face only grinned at him. Then somehow he managed to drive Hengest away and picked up his father in his arms. He tried to run but found that his legs were slow and heavy, as though he were wading through water. Now the Jutes and other monsters were gaining on him, closing in on him, and then they were not, as though the moment were being drawn out to maximise his terror.

He trudged on. He carried his father past the wolves, past the walking dead men and the fire, and then he found himself back in his father's rooms in Glevum. He sat his father down on the desk. His father looked back at him with dull eyes and blue lips, dead once more, with the stylus and writing tablet clutched in his hands again. Then the corpse lifted the stylus and plunged the point into Eldol's chest.

It was already morning when Eldol woke up, screaming, next to the dying embers of the fire. Vortigern was still asleep. Eldol took advantage of the privacy this afforded him and wept for a little while. Then he cursed himself for his carelessness at leaving the fire to burn through the night. It was already quite warm. Eldol sat and enjoyed the calm of the morning while he waited for Vortigern to wake up.

They set off again, and later that morning they came to the road. They followed it a little way until they came to a milestone. Vortigern read the inscription.

'We must have lost our bearings a little,' he said. 'But it doesn't matter. We're only five miles from Aquae Sulis.'

The hard paving stones aggravated the soreness of their feet, however, and they were forced to go slowly. They came within sight of the town. The wind was blowing against them, and they heard the people gathered outside the town walls before they saw them clearly. When they drew closer they saw that the crowd was gathered around a great square pit dug near the gatehouse. A wave of nausea hit Eldol when he saw the corpses being

unloaded from carts into the pit.

‘I don’t believe it,’ he said. ‘They must have... my lord, I think they must have got here before us.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Vortigern. ‘My eyes aren’t good at distance, Eldol; tell me what you see.’

‘They’re digging a... a big hole in the ground by the wall. It’s a grave. It looks like Hengest has killed half the town looking for us.’ His voice had risen to a high tenor, and there were tears in his eyes. ‘I’ve got to see if Rocatos and Alauna are in that grave. Come on, my lord.’

Vortigern caught him by the sleeve.

‘Wait. You must try to stay calm.’

‘No, we can’t wait! I have to see if they’re alive!’

‘Calm yourself!’ the old man barked. Eldol recoiled as though he had been slapped. Vortigern went on. ‘We need to exercise some caution. I don’t think Hengest is behind this.’

Eldol took a deep breath.

‘What do you mean, my lord?’

‘If Hengest had breached the walls it would have been much worse. I doubt he would have left anyone alive to bury the dead. No, this looks like something else. I understand that you’re worried about your friends, Eldol, but we are still in grave danger. Are you calm now?’ Eldol nodded, and Vortigern let go of his sleeve. ‘Good. We will go and see if your friends are in that pit over there. Let me do the talking.’

They approached the gathering by the grave. A priest was reciting something in Latin over the sobs of the mourners while a handful of soldiers skirted around the gathering. There were perhaps seventy or eighty corpses already in the pit, with more coming from the carts. Some appeared to be soldiers stripped of their armour for burial, but the majority were ordinary citizens. All had sustained terrible injuries.

The priest spoke to the crowd.

‘Look now upon the destruction that we have brought upon ourselves. See now what has become of our pride, for we have been proud. We have turned away from the Lord, and He has made His displeasure known. Yet the Lord is merciful, for we who stand here today have been spared. By His grace we have survived. We must accept Jesus Christ into our hearts as our Saviour, submit ourselves to His love, beg His forgiveness for the abominations committed by our people...’

‘I can’t see them in the grave, my lord,’ said Eldol. ‘Shall we ask someone?’

‘Stop calling me “my lord”,’ said Vortigern. ‘We don’t know who might be listening. You wait here; I’ll find out what has happened.’

Vortigern approached a citizen who stood at the graveside, a man whose gaze was fixed on the ground between his feet as he absorbed his share of the priest’s censure.

‘Excuse me, friend. I am here to see my friends Rocatos and Alauna. They live near the bath houses in this town. Do you know them?’

‘I don’t know anything,’ said the citizen. Then he cringed as a soldier stomped towards them, rattling the scales of his armour with every step, and tilted back his head to glare at Vortigern.

‘Is there a problem, old man?’

‘No, no problem, sir,’ said Vortigern, lowering his eyes. ‘I am here to visit some friends, you see, and I just saw this grave and all these poor souls who’ve died. I’m dreadfully worried about my friends. May I ask what has happened here?’

‘Where are you from?’

‘From Gallia. I’m here with my friend, that big fellow by the edge of the pit there.’

‘And what’s your business?’

‘We are merchants, sir. A new trade route has opened up in Gallia, and there’ll be new shipments of wine coming into the country. New coinage too, if all goes well...’

‘Yes, yes, you don’t have to tell me your life story. There’s been trouble in the town.’

‘So I see, sir. What exactly has happened?’

‘The magistrate left a couple of days ago, for his own safety. The plague got a bit out of hand in the slum area. He took a few too many soldiers with him, though, and there’s been a raid.’

‘A raid?’

‘The Scoti, a whole damned fleet of them. Came upriver in the dead of night. Who are your friends in the town?’

‘Rocatos and Alauna. They live near the bath houses.’

‘Have you checked the pit over there?’

‘Yes. They are not there.’

‘All right. You and your friend had better check their house, then, if you know where it is. But I warn you, it isn’t pretty.’

Vortigern beckoned to Eldol, and they went through the gatehouse. An awful smell pervaded the streets, like a mixture of burnt hair and bad water.

‘It’s so strange, said Eldol. ‘I’ve never known it to be so quiet here. What did that soldier tell you, my lord?’

‘A pack of lies. He said that the magistrate has fled the town because of the plague, and that since then there had been an attack by a raiding party. The Scoti, to be precise.’

‘Is it unlikely that raiders attacked the town?’

‘No, not really, but he was keeping something from me. There is something they don’t want outsiders to know about.’

‘Like what?’

‘Who knows? There’s more to this affair than a simple raid, that much is certain. There would have been hundreds more...’

Vortigern trailed off and stared straight ahead.

‘My lord?’ said Eldol, and then he saw. They were in the great square in the centre of Aquae Sulis now, between the bath houses and the old temple. Many of the buildings in this central district were burnt out. The streets beyond the square were strewn with corpses. Some were soldiers, but the overwhelming majority of the dead were citizens. A few horse-drawn carts were dotted around the area, and teams of slaves were loading more bodies into them.

‘Worse than I’d imagined,’ said Vortigern distantly. ‘A good deal worse. Where do your friends live?’

‘Just around the corner, my lord. Can we go and see if they’re all right?’

‘Wait.’ Vortigern pointed to the mouth of an alleyway, where the bodies of three soldiers lay heaped on top of one another. ‘Take their swords.’

‘My lord?’

‘Hurry—and stop calling me “my lord”!’

Eldol gingerly lifted the corpses in the alleyway, pursing his lips. It was like lifting bags of wet clay. They had not begun to stink yet, and he was glad of that. Eventually he managed to pull the sword belts off two of them, holding them up with his fingertips as though they were dirty.

‘For heaven’s sake, Eldol!’

‘Sorry.’

He handed one of the sword belts to Vortigern and buckled the other around his waist. It was the larger of the two, but it was still tight on him.

‘Never mind. Now, let’s go and check on your friends.’

Rocatos’s house was a fairly typical dwelling for a wealthy family in the town centre. The entrance was tucked in between two vacant shop fronts, both covered in graffiti. A wagon, much larger than the carts they had seen, was tethered close to the entrance, but there were no slaves to be seen outside. The doors to the house had been kicked in.

Eldol swallowed drily and drew his sword. They went through.

The entrance led into a tiled courtyard filled with big potted plants, most of which looked like they were dying. The door on the other side of the courtyard, which opened onto the living room, had also been kicked in. Eldol looked around at Vortigern, who drew his own sword and nodded. They skirted around the square pond in the centre of the courtyard and approached the door as quietly as possible. Here Eldol noticed a wet dirty smell that he could not quite place.

Then the guard dog attacked.

VII

The deep hellish barking echoed around the courtyard as the beast leapt out of the doorway at Eldol, snapping and slavering, black lips pulled back from yellowed fangs.

Eldol slipped and struck out blindly with his sword as he fell onto his back. The edge of the blade sheared into the dog's face and sliced off its lower jaw.

The dog collapsed onto its side, making a horrible noise somewhere between a whine and a gurgle as the bright blood jetted out of its face. It writhed on the tiles next to the cooling chunk of meat and bone that until a moment ago had been its jaw. Eldol's gorge rose. He saw now that it was not even a particularly big dog.

A wiry, hard-eyed man with a boxer's nose appeared in the doorway. He held in his hands a short spear, which he thrust into the back of the dog's neck. The dog stopped moving. The stranger turned the dripping point on Eldol, who was still on his back.

'Do you know how much that dog was worth?' the stranger yelled, eyes blazing, veins bulging in his neck. 'Drop your sword! You too, old man, or your friend here dies.'

Eldol and Vortigern did as the man said. The man kept the spear trained on Eldol as he bent down to pick up his sword.

'Now, who are you and what are you doing here?'

'Who am I?' Eldol wheezed, winded by his fall. 'This is my friend's house! Who are you?'

'A looter. Your friends aren't here, and I'm looting their house. I'll ask you once more: who are you and what are you doing here?'

'Please,' said Vortigern, holding up his hands. 'We mean you no harm. We merely wanted to see if our friends are safe. We are merchants on our way to Glevum.'

'Glevum, eh?'

Eldol's emotions were getting the better of him. He enquired as to the whereabouts of his friends at the top of his voice, and in the most offensive terms imaginable.

'You'd better calm down,' said the looter. 'And you might want to watch what you say to me, seeing as I've got a spear pointed at your throat.'

'My friend is only worried,' said Vortigern. 'Let him up, would you? We won't be any trouble.'

'Oh yes?' said the looter, and his voice cracked. He was just as frightened as they were. 'I'm warning you, if you give me any trouble I'll make short work of the pair of you!'

Now that the looter's eyes were on Vortigern, Eldol took his chance. He grabbed the spear below the point and kicked out with all his strength. His foot smashed into the looter's body just under the ribcage, sending him flying backwards into the living room. The spear

broke, and Eldol dropped the sticky shard of wood onto the floor. He scrambled to his feet and dived after the looter, who was flat on his back.

It was dark in the living room, and Eldol forgot about the sword until he saw the gleam of the metal in the shadows. He stamped on the looter's wrist, making him drop it. Then he crouched over him and began to pummel him with his fists.

'What have you done with them? Where are my friends?'

The looter said nothing. He only grunted and gasped as Eldol's massive fists pounded his face, while throwing punches of his own that bounced off Eldol's ribs unnoticed. Eventually his arms flopped down onto the floor.

Vortigern appeared in the doorway.

'Eldol, he will die if you carry on like that. If you're going to question the man, at least give him time to answer.'

Eldol paused. The looter drew a loud, ragged intake of breath.

'Your friends aren't here,' he croaked. 'The house was empty. They must have left town when the magistrate did.'

'I see,' said Eldol. 'So you thought you'd just go ahead and loot their house?'

'There's hardly anything here to steal. Someone must have got here before me. Look, it's not like I've robbed them at spearpoint. They'd already left town. There's been a riot, for Christ's sake. Let me up.'

'A riot, you say?' said Vortigern. 'The soldier at the gate told me it was a raid. He said the Scoti had been here.'

The looter half laughed, half coughed.

'Did you see any dead Scoti outside? Even one? Let me up.'

The looter was a sorry sight, bloody and limp. Eldol got up and shambled into the shadows on the other side of the room. The punches that the looter had thrown to his ribs now took effect, and his sides began to throb.

Vortigern crouched down beside the looter.

'Who are you?'

'My name's Lestin,' the man said, slowly sitting up. 'I'm just a dog breeder from Venta. I swear I've never tried to steal anything before today.'

'Venta Belgarum?'

'Yes. I left my home because of the plague. My wife and two daughters are dead from it. The soldiers at Venta Belgarum don't even try to stop people leaving town anymore. I went to Glevum a few weeks ago, but they wouldn't let me in. Not unless I had a trade. So I went back home to fetch my dogs, so I'd have something to sell, but—'

'We're headed for Glevum,' said Eldol from the corner of the room.

'Then I'd make some new plans if I were you,' said Lestin. 'The other day I saw an army marching towards Glevum on the Corinium road. Saxons, I think.'

'Saxons?' said Vortigern. 'Are you sure?'

'That's what they looked like to me. That's why I came here instead.'

'We're done for,' said Eldol, sinking back against the wall. 'What are we going to do now?'

'We'll just have to make new plans, as he says,' said Vortigern. 'Tell me about the riot, Lestin. Don't be afraid.'

Lestin propped himself up against the legs of a chair and wiped some of the blood from his face onto his sleeve.

‘I only know what I’ve been told, which isn’t much. I asked a few people at the north gate when the soldiers weren’t looking. The riot went on for days in the town centre. They say it started because of a murder trial. A few months ago, a tribune’s son murdered a girl at a house just around the corner from here. Even now they don’t know where he put the head. Well, the trial just finished recently, and he went free. He was a Catholic, you see, and the girl was a Pelagian.’

‘What’s a Pelagian?’ said Eldol.

Lestin shrugged.

‘One of these heretic sects. They think we can get into heaven after we die just by leading a good life.’

‘You mean we can’t?’

‘Can we stick to the matter at hand?’ said Vortigern. ‘The riot, Lestin. What happened?’

‘Aquae Sulis is like any other big town,’ Lestin continued. ‘There’s a lot of poorer folk here who follow these heresies, or whatever you want to call them—Pelagians, Arians, Manichaeans and so on. The people with the money and the power are always Catholic, and so are the soldiers. It’s the way it’s always been.’

‘So the Pelagians rose up against them?’

‘Not just the Pelagians. By the end it was more or less anyone who wasn’t a soldier or a slave owner. It started off with them burning the murderer’s house, and then the soldiers started throwing their weight around in the centre of the town. It just escalated. It wasn’t about the murdered girl anymore.’

‘So the soldiers killed all those people outside?’

‘Yes. Some soldiers were killed in the riot, you see, and they didn’t just want to even the score. The magistrate and the tribunes had already left town, so there was no one here to hold them back. They blocked off the streets and trapped the rioters in the town centre. They just penned them in and killed them.’

‘Disgraceful,’ said Vortigern. ‘I knew the soldiers were hiding something. But there was such an air of penitence when we arrived. A priest outside the town walls was saying that the townspeople had brought it upon themselves.’

‘He’ll convince them of it, too.’

‘No doubt. So, what were you planning to do after you had looted this house?’

Lestin winced at the reproach he heard in Vortigern’s voice, but then he saw that the old man was smiling. ‘Well, I can’t sell my dogs here, so I thought I’d go to Venta Silurum. I hear it’s a good market town.’

‘But that would mean passing through Glevum, would it not?’

‘Not necessarily. I was thinking of heading to Port Abona. Maybe I can persuade someone to ferry me across.’

Vortigern looked over at Eldol, who did not seem to be listening. Lestin spoke again.

‘I’ve got a horse and wagon outside. Perhaps you’d like to come with me. I’d be happy to—’

‘Yes,’ said Vortigern. ‘We will come with you, Lestin.’

‘What?’ said Eldol. ‘But what about Glevum?’

‘Glevum will manage without us,’ said Vortigern, standing up again. ‘Hengest will not take the town.’

‘But how do you know?’

‘It’s too well fortified. That will not stop him from trying his luck, though. If he thinks we’re headed for Glevum—’

‘But how do you know we can trust this thief?’ said Eldol. He looked at Lestin. ‘I mean no offence.’

Lestin grinned sarcastically at Eldol through bloodied teeth.

‘Oh, none taken, of course.’

‘Well, you were looting this house.’

‘I was starving. Like I said, I’d never stolen anything before the plague killed my family.’

‘I’m sorry for your loss, but even so...’

‘What choice do we have?’ said Vortigern. ‘In the absence of safe options we must take risks.’

‘So it’s Hengest, then,’ Lestin said with a sudden bold curiosity. He pulled himself up onto the chair behind him. ‘Hengest himself. And he’s looking for you two?’

Vortigern nodded.

‘He has already tried to kill us once. This man here with me is the magistrate for Glevum. I am the head of the Consilium.’

‘My lord!’

‘Oh, be quiet, Eldol!’

‘Come off it!’ said Lestin, almost managing a laugh. ‘You must think I was born yesterday!’

Vortigern took something out of a pouch that hung from his belt and held it in front of Lestin’s face. It was a chunky gold signet ring, with a dragon’s head done in ruby. Naked terror flashed in Lestin’s eyes at the sight of it.

‘It—it’s a great honour, my lord,’ He stammered. ‘I’ll help you any way I can. And you needn’t worry, my lord consiliar, I’m a loyal citizen.’

‘Needless to say, you will be handsomely rewarded,’ said Vortigern, dropping the ring back into his pouch. ‘I am generous to my friends. But know this: if you attempt to betray us you’ll find that I’m merciless in my revenge.’ When he spoke these last words, his voice dropped to a near whisper. The effect was not lost on Lestin.

‘I... I don’t doubt it, my lord. I won’t let you down. My lord consiliar, I’m sorry for breaking into your friends’ home, and for threatening you. I’m very sorry, really.’

Eldol was unimpressed, but Vortigern had spoken for him. It did not matter what he thought.

‘It’s fine. I hope I didn’t hurt you too badly.’

‘Oh, I’ve still got all my teeth,’ said Lestin, trying to cloak his fear in a blithe and breezy manner. It was pitiful. ‘And I’m fairly sure I can walk. If it’s not too bold of me, my lord consiliar, I noticed that your friends left a bit of food in the kitchen. Some salted beef, and a bit of wine. I’ve got some bread too.’

‘Wine? Good lord... no, no, it’s not too bold at all. Are you hungry, my lord?’

Vortigern cackled.

‘That was a very silly question, Eldol, but I am glad you asked it. I could eat a whole

stable of horses. And this house looks like a good place to rest and regroup. I suggest we stay here tonight and set out for Port Abona in the morning. What do you think?

‘Wine,’ said Eldol, ‘and a real bed to sleep in. I must be dreaming.’

VIII

In the woods that surrounded the country house a few miles outside of Verulamium, Pascent was looking for his mother.

The slave woman back at the house had told him that there were ghosts in the woods. She had meant it as a warning. To her ghosts were something to be feared, but Pascent wasn't afraid. It was the very reason why he had come. The priests had said that his mother couldn't get into heaven because she had taken her own life. But he didn't believe she could be in hell, either, because it wasn't her fault. His brothers had driven her to it. Surely God would understand that.

She had loved being out among the trees when she was alive. In the summertime, when Pascent was very small, she used to take him out to the woods and let him play in the stream. That was before they moved to Londinium. He remembered how he had shrieked and giggled at the cold water on his skin, and at the tiny frogs that had fled from him into the rushes. He remembered his mother stooping to wash her hair in the water, humming to herself. She was happy then. She too had told Pascent about the ghosts in the forest. The good spirits shone like the sun, while the evil ones were as black as night and lived underground. These underground spirits didn't come out in the daytime because the sunlight would turn them to stone. It was safe for Pascent to be in the forest at least until sunset.

'Mother,' he called into the trees. 'Are you there?'

There was no answer but the wind and the squawking of the crows. His mother had once told him that crows guided souls into the land of the dead. Perhaps they might guide them out again from time to time.

'Mother?'

'Pascent,' came a woman's voice from behind him, very faintly. His heart leapt, and the voice came again.

'Pascent, are you there?'

But it was not his mother's voice. It was the slave woman from the house.

'Pascent! Are you in the woods again?'

'Stupid old witch.'

'Pascent—'

'I'm here!' he cried with sudden fury. 'What do you want?'

'Dinner is ready,' the slave woman shouted. 'I've told you before not to go into those woods, boy.'

'All right, I'm coming,' Pascent shouted, kicking at a nearby bush.

Everything was upside down at Elaphius's house. Until recently the idea that a slave

could scold anyone would have been preposterous to Pascent, but scold him she did. She was forever telling him off for wearing his cloak and boots in the dining room, and for how dirty he was. Usually if he sat in silence for long enough she would go away and leave him alone. He had considered complaining about her to the lady of the house, but he rarely saw her.

Perhaps he would tell Elaphius about it when he returned from the meeting between his father and Grandfather Hengest. Elaphius was always kind to Pascent. He would probably sell the slave woman for a better one when he learnt how she behaved while he was away. But then again, Elaphius's son was devoted to her. Everything was upside down.

Pascent came out of the woods and stamped his feet all the way to the entrance of the house, where the slave woman stood with her hands on her hips and a scowl on her fat face.

'Pascent! Look at the state of your clothes! When was the last time you washed yourself, boy? It's not my job to clean you.'

Pascent did not look at her. He pushed past her a little more roughly than he needed to and went in through the doorway. She gasped theatrically. Pascent did not care. She might scold him but she would never dare raise her hand to him, never in a million years. A slave was a slave. Even in this house that boundary could never be crossed. He went through the courtyard and into the dining room, where Elaphius's son was already sitting at the table. His name was Celerus.

'Hello,' he said as Pascent took a seat facing him. 'The first course has been ready for a while, you know. Where have you been?'

'In the woods.'

'In the woods? What were you doing there?'

Pascent said nothing, and picked up a handful of mushrooms with his grubby fingers. He could not decide whether he liked Celerus or not. He certainly didn't hate him, like he hated the slave woman.

'Hasn't Mamma Rigana told you about the ghosts in the woods?' said Celerus now.

Mamma Rigana was what he called the slave woman.

'There are no ghosts in those woods,' said Pascent. 'I was out there looking for them.'

'Weren't you scared?'

'No. Where's your mother?'

'I don't know. Probably in bed again. She hardly ever comes out of her room when Father's not here.'

'Doesn't she eat in here?'

'Not very often. She doesn't like to look at me while she's eating.'

'What?'

'She says I put her off her food. But Mamma Rigana says that might change soon, though, now that I'm getting better.'

Celerus turned his eyes away and chewed his food. He was a very sickly-looking child. His skin was pale yellow, apart from the greasy dark rings around his eyes, and his thin hair was of no particular colour. Sometimes his breathing was so laboured you could hear it from the next room. But he was getting better now, they said.

A few months ago, some kind of holy man from abroad had come to see Celerus. The slave woman could hardly stop talking about him and his miraculous cure. The boy still needed two sticks to be able to walk around the house, though, so it didn't seem like much of

a cure to Pascent.

‘She shouldn’t say things like that. Your mother, I mean.’

Celerus shrugged.

‘She doesn’t say it to be cruel. She isn’t well.’

‘What’s wrong with her?’

‘I don’t know. She gets sad.’

‘That isn’t an illness.’

‘It can be. It’s the Devil that does it to her, just like it was the Devil that made me a cripple. She can hardly cope when Father isn’t here. She’ll get better one day, though.’ Celerus fidgeted and cleared the phlegm from his throat. It was a revolting sound. ‘After dinner, would you like to play tabula with me?’

‘I suppose so. You’ll have to go over the rules again, though.’

‘Of course. You nearly beat me last time, you know.’

‘Hmm.’

‘This might be our last chance to play, too. My father should be back home tonight. Yours too. I bet you’re looking forward to seeing him.’ Pascent said nothing. Celerus carried on speaking, if only to fill the silence. ‘My father seemed excited before he set out. Nervous too. He didn’t really talk about what was going to happen at the meeting, though. He never does.’

‘I don’t know what he was so excited about,’ said Pascent. ‘He didn’t need to be there. The meeting should just have been between my father and my grandfather. No one else.’

‘Surely not, Pascent? My father said that the future of the country would be decided at the meeting.’

‘That’s stupid. It’s a family problem. No one else should have been involved.’

Pascent shovelled the last of the mushrooms into his mouth. The rest of the first course consisted of various pickled and raw vegetables, none of which he liked. He waited for his plate to be taken away by the slave woman and then the next course was served. It was a kind of meat he had never seen before. The animals were about the size of mice, brown and roasted whole.

‘What are these?’

‘Laurices,’ said Celerus.

‘What?’

‘You know, baby rabbits. They’re cut out of the mother rabbit before they’re born. Very expensive.’

‘Horrible,’ said Pascent, picking one up. ‘We had pork last night. I liked the pork.’

There was a noise of doors slamming from down the hall, and then the slave woman came rushing into the room. She was crying.

‘Boys,’ she said, ‘leave your dinners here and come into the living room.’

‘What about dessert?’ said Pascent.

‘Mamma Rigana, what’s wrong?’ said Celerus.

‘I can’t say it,’ she said. ‘Don’t ask me, my dear. Just come with me now, both of you.’

She helped Celerus out of the chair and handed him his walking sticks. The boy looked deathly pale, as if he already knew what had happened. Pascent felt a terrible suspicion deep within him, but he tried to ignore it. He followed Celerus and the slave woman out of the

dining room.

They went down a long corridor and into the main living room of the house. Celerus's mother was there, her eyes red and puffed-up, lips covered in spittle. Two old soldiers stood close by. The designs on their big round shields marked them as being infantry from Verulamium. Upon seeing Celerus, his mother held her arms out to him.

'Come here, my son,' she sobbed. Celerus stood rooted to the spot, bewildered, and looked up at the slave woman.

'Go to your mother, my dear,' she said, ruffling his meagre hair.

Celerus hobbled over to his mother, who embraced him. Pascent could see Celerus's face in profile against his mother's breast, wide-eyed and still. He looked like a mouse in the clutches of some great bird of prey.

'Tell him,' Celerus's mother said to the soldiers. 'Tell him what you told me.'

One of the soldiers cleared his throat.

'I'm afraid I have some bad news. Your father is dead. The heathens killed him at Ambrosius's fort.'

Celerus didn't even blink. He only half-stood, half-dangled in his mother's crushing embrace. The soldier looked over at Pascent, and sighed. 'This must be Lord Vortigern's son.'

The soldier spoke to Pascent, but he didn't hear him. He staggered backwards, and the slave woman caught him by the shoulders.

'There, there, my dear. It'll be all right, you'll see.'

'Get your hands off me!'

Pascent turned and punched her right in the middle of her belly. She fell on her backside, more out of shock than anything, and he ran.

No family, he thought as he rushed dizzily through the long evening shadows of the courtyard, hardly seeing where he went. *I'm on my own now*. Before long he was in the woods again. He ran on, deeper and deeper into the bosom of the trees, until he was out of breath.

It had got dark quickly. Pascent remembered the ghosts and shivered. It was best to go back to the house, he thought. They would only come looking for him otherwise. He turned and walked, and he soon realised that he was lost. He should have reached the grounds of the house by now. The last of the twilight was almost gone. All he could do was to keep going straight ahead in the hope that he would come to the road sooner or later.

Then he heard noises in the dark.

The first came from behind him, and he held his breath. It sounded like someone whispering, though it could just as easily have been the wind. He trod more carefully, trying to make less noise. A memory from when he was very young came back to him, of the old country house, and of how the wind used to whistle through the valley in wintertime. That sound used to terrify him at night, so much so that he would sometimes get out of bed and go to his mother. She would comfort him, and his father would scold him for being so silly. He smiled now at the memory.

Another sound came from his left, louder this time. Pascent stopped and sank to a crouch. There was a rustling ahead of him, and now he was certain someone was there. Three of them, he thought, surrounding him. A twig cracked, a branch creaked, louder, closing in. The

dark spirits of the forest had come for him. He closed his eyes, and the first tears spilled over.

‘I can see him,’ said a low rasping voice from the dark.

‘So can I,’ said another. ‘Let’s not waste any time.’

He tried to remember what his mother had told him about the ghosts, anything that might help, but it was so long ago. There was a muffled laugh behind him. It was the most terrible sound he had ever heard. He curled into a ball and held his breath, not daring to make a noise even though he knew they could see him. The tears ran silently down his cheeks until the first pair of fearfully strong hands fell upon him. The indifferent forest swam around Pascent, and he was deaf even to his own screams as everything went black.

IX

The ghosts didn't kill Pascent right away, as he found himself hoping they might.

First they tied his hands behind his back and blindfolded him. Then two of them pushed him along between them, while a third walked in front. The ghosts didn't glide over the ground, as he had thought ghosts might. Their hands, though cold, were solid enough. They smelt terrible. The sack they had pulled over his head made it difficult for him to find his way without tripping. Sometimes the ghosts caught his arms in time. Sometimes they didn't, and he fell flat on his face. Upon his seventh or eighth tumble into the dirt Pascent's kidnappers stopped.

'This is pointless,' said the one who had been at Pascent's right shoulder. 'I think we should just kill him here.'

'Hush!' said the one in front.

'What for? He can't understand what we're saying.'

'I can,' said Pascent, wriggling on the ground until he managed to get to his knees. It only now registered with him that the ghosts were speaking not in Britannic, but in some form of his mother's language.

The one in front pulled the bag off Pascent's head and crouched down beside him. Pascent saw now that they were not ghosts at all. The truth was perhaps worse. He had often imagined how he would react if he were captured by his father's enemies. He liked to think of himself as a tough boy, and he had always thought that if such a crisis arose he would fight them off and run away. But his courage was nowhere to be found.

'Don't kill me,' he said.

'He was raised by Hengest's daughter, you blockhead,' said the man in front to the one on the right. 'He can understand you just as well as I can.' To Pascent he said, 'You're Vortigern's son, aren't you?'

'Yes. Don't kill me.'

'That's not for us to decide. We're taking you to our king.'

'You mean Grandfather Hengest?'

'He's not our king.'

'But you're Jutes, aren't you?'

'We are not!' said the man to Pascent's left. 'We're Saxons, you cheeky little swine!'

'The *waelisc* never know the difference,' said the man in front.

'But he's half Jutish himself!'

'He's not, the girl was his stepmother. Look, forget about it for now. Boy, we're taking you to our king. If you behave yourself you might live to talk about it.'

‘I’ll behave,’ said Pascent, beginning to weep again. ‘I promise.’

The bag went back over his head, and on they went through the trees. Pascent cursed himself with every step. If it were not for his own stupidity he would be safe in Elaphius’s house right now. But then he realised that this was not true. The Saxons had been out in the woods looking for him. No doubt they had stormed the country house and found that he was missing. Celerus, his mother and the slave woman must all be either dead or captured.

Pascent could see nothing ahead of him, but he had some idea of his surroundings from the noises he heard, and from the changing terrain under his feet. The tree roots and bushes petered out, and then he found himself walking through grass. He heard snatches of voices around him from various distances. All of them spoke the common language of the Saxons and Jutes. The air grew warmer and stiller, and then he was indoors. Beneath him he could see a wooden floor covered in muddy footprints, lit by flickering firelight. He was shoved onto a bench.

‘Where am I?’

No one answered him, and he decided it was best to keep quiet. He waited. Before long he heard footsteps echoing towards him. The bag came off his head, and when his eyes adjusted to the light he saw he was in a long corridor, lit by torches fixed to the brick walls. The men who had grabbed him in the forest were no longer there. Standing before him with the bag in his hands was a young priest.

‘My name’s Eoppa. Don’t be afraid. Your name is Pascent, isn’t it?’

Pascent nodded.

‘Well, then. I’m not going to hurt you, so I don’t want you to be afraid of me. I mean you no harm. Do you believe that?’

Pascent nodded again, and the tears returned. The priest spoke with such kindness in his voice that it was almost too much to bear.

‘Good. Now, I hear you understand the Germanic language. Is that right?’

‘Yes,’ said Pascent. ‘My mother was a Jute. I learnt it from her.’

‘That’s good,’ said Eoppa. He spoke with only a very faint accent, just enough to mark him as a foreigner. He must have worked very hard at it. ‘Now, Pascent, do you know where you are?’ The boy shook his head. ‘You are in the hall of King Cuthwulf. Do you know who King Cuthwulf is?’

‘The King of the Saxons?’

The faintest hint of a smirk dimpled the priest’s cheek, trembled for a second, then was gone.

‘Not quite, at least not of all the Saxons. He is rather the king of the Saxons who live between Verulamium and Londinium.’

‘But that’s hardly...’

‘I know. It’s hardly a kingdom at all, just a group of villages. But those villages can raise many fighting men. Now, King Cuthwulf is a very proud man, and he is easily offended. For that reason you must speak to him only in Britannic, and I’ll translate. It is very important that you do not upset him even if you don’t mean to.’

‘But why does he want to speak to me at all?’

‘Because you are Vortigern’s only surviving son.’

‘Does King Cuthwulf fight for my father?’

‘He did, but things have changed. Have you been told about what happened?’

‘Not exactly. Some men from Verulamium came to the house but I ran away. My father’s dead, isn’t he?’

‘No,’ said Eoppa, drawing the word out. His expression was difficult to read. ‘No, Pascent, as far as we know your father is still alive.’

Pascent waited for the relief to flood through him at the news, but he only felt frightened.

‘But the soldiers from Verulamium... Elaphius’s wife was crying, and—’

‘Elaphius is indeed dead. He was not so fortunate. The meeting between your father and Hengest didn’t go well, Pascent. All the consiliars who attended were killed, except for your father and one other. People are looking for them.’

‘Your people? You mean the Saxons?’

‘Yes, and people of other races—Jutes, Angles... no doubt the Scoti, too, when they hear the news. That’s before we even think of all the enemies he’s made amongst his own people. I’m afraid your father’s time is over, Pascent, even if he did escape that massacre. Now, I have no wish to see him die. I’m only a priest, and politics are of no interest to me. But *your* time is not over yet, and you can survive all this danger if you are sensible. I want to help you. Will you let me help you?’ Pascent nodded again. ‘Good. Now, what we must do is convince King Cuthwulf absolutely that you’re not a threat to him.’

‘But how could I be a threat to him? I’m thirteen!’

‘Yes, but boys soon grow up into men. We need to convince King Cuthwulf that you will not harbour any grudge against him for what has happened or for what may happen yet.’

‘I won’t,’ said Pascent, and he was sickened at how easily the words came. ‘If he lets me live he’ll never hear from me again, I promise.’

‘Good. You’re looking at this sensibly, that’s good. I will help you, Pascent. Just follow my instructions and you’ll be safe, I promise. Are you ready to see the king?’ Pascent nodded. ‘Good. Now remember to speak only in Britannic. I’ll translate.’

Eoppa helped Pascent to his feet and untied his hands. A faint hubbub grew louder as they walked down the corridor, and they entered a hall rather like the one at Elaphius’s house, only smaller. It was also darker and dirtier, and packed full of people. A fire was burning in a makeshift hearth right in the centre of the room. The section of ceiling above it had been broken through to allow the smoke to escape. Apart from being unsightly, it didn’t work very well. Pascent’s eyes began to sting as soon as he walked in.

At the far end of the hall there sat a very fat man flanked by a dozen warriors and innumerable women. He was dripping with gold and slick-skinned with the grease of a thousand missed baths. Much of the hair on the top of his head was long gone, and what was left was parted in the middle and swept carefully across to cover the pate. Heaving his bulk out of the seat with shaking arms, he fixed Pascent with a dazzling smile and made a bow. He looked unsettlingly foolish.

The warriors, grubby and lean, held their positions and looked at Pascent as though he were a rat set loose in their midst. The women peered at him from under heavy eyelids with no interest whatsoever.

‘*He* is a king?’ Pascent whispered.

‘Hush,’ said Eoppa, and then he spoke to Cuthwulf in Saxon. ‘My king, I present to you Pascent of the Vitalini, son of Vortigern.’

‘You are greatly honoured to be here today,’ said Cuthwulf, stepping forward. ‘You must know this. I am Cuthwulf, King of the Middle Saxons, conqueror of the great forest of the south, lord of the beasts of the earth and the birds of the sky, son of Cuthwine, son of Bula, son of Scite, son of Seaxneat, son of Woden of the Wavering Eye, receiver of the slain, engager of battles and mover of the stars. You must know that I too am greatly honoured, Pascent, Prince of the Britons, in welcoming you to my mead-hall.’

The smile on Cuthwulf’s face never wavered while he delivered this incredible introduction. His voice was as gentle and calm as if he had been offering Pascent something to drink.

‘Pretend you don’t understand, Pascent,’ Eoppa said quietly. ‘It will seem that I’m translating what King Cuthwulf said.’

‘But I really don’t understand! What is he talking about?’

‘Put as simply as possible, King Cuthwulf just said “hello”, and “welcome to my home”. It is the custom of the kings of our race to introduce themselves somewhat... well, somewhat like that. You should respond likewise.’

Pascent shifted from foot to foot.

‘Tell him I said “thank you”, and... I... I’m pleased to meet him, and...’

‘Glorious Cuthwulf, breaker of rings and feeder of ravens,’ said Eoppa to the king, ‘I, Pascent of the Vitalini, son of Vortigern, King of the Britons, slayer of princes and enemy of Romans, accept your hospitality with thanks. May your dominions ever grow and may your reign never end.’

Pascent flashed a grateful look at Eoppa. Cuthwulf clapped his hands together and laughed.

‘He is a clever one, this boy,’ he said. ‘I hope he is a good boy too. I hope he is clever-sensible and not clever-tricksy, or he will be sorry! But don’t translate that, Eoppa. We must not frighten our guest. Tell him what I am going to say now. Pascent, I know that you must be very worried for your father. He is a good man, your father, and I love him very much. He is the wisest of all kings and a bringer of peace. But he has done much evil and has been very bad, and so we must get rid of him.’

‘Now, you have spoken very well to me, and so I know that you must have learnt a little of our culture because you are such a clever boy. What I propose is that you come to us and be a brother warrior with us, the Saxons, for we are the strongest people. We have always been the strongest, and now we have learnt about the Lord Jesus, and so we are stronger still because He is on our side. We are the favourite people of the Lord Jesus. If you join us you will be strong with us, and I will be your new father.’

‘Now, Pascent,’ Eoppa began with a pained look, ‘I know that was a little hard to follow. I’ll try to help you understand—’

‘I do understand,’ said Pascent. ‘He’s out of his mind, isn’t he?’

‘Utterly. That’s why you mustn’t upset him. Now, he is proposing that you take an oath of loyalty here in front of all his people. He wants to adopt you as his son.’

‘What? But that’s madness!’

‘No, no, that’s actually a very old custom among our people. Many wars have been avoided by our kings adopting the sons of their enemies. It’s the way it’s always been.’

‘But what was all that stuff about Jesus?’

The ghost of a smile trembled in Eoppa's cheek again.

'King Cuthwulf was recently baptised into the Roman Church. He doesn't fully understand it yet, of course. He still claims descent from the Saxon gods, while denouncing them as false idols, which I think confuses him as much as anyone else. But that's not important. In order to stay alive you must take the oath, Pascent.'

'What is the oath, exactly?'

'What is happening?' said Cuthwulf. His voice remained gentle, but his eyes were now like little slivers of ice. 'Does he accept or not?'

'I am just explaining the oath to him, Great King,' said Eoppa. 'He does not know of our custom.'

'Teach him well, Eoppa. He must know that I am serious.'

'We can't delay, Pascent,' said Eoppa. 'You can see that his mood is beginning to turn. On no account must you make King Cuthwulf angry at you. Do what you must to stay alive.'

'Yes,' said Pascent. 'I accept.'

'Yes,' said Eoppa. 'I, Pascent of the Vitalini, will swear to be your sword and shield, your eyes and your ears. I pledge my undying loyalty to the conqueror of the forest and pray that he, in his wisdom and beneficence, will accept me to his bosom as his son and warrior.'

Cuthwulf clapped his hands together again.

'Ha! It is well said. Bring the sacred horn.'

One of the women sprang into alertness and went out of the room. She returned carrying a drinking horn filled to the brim with mead, which she handed to Cuthwulf. Eoppa led Pascent closer to the fire so that he stood directly opposite Cuthwulf, who spoke so loudly now that his voice became hoarse.

'I, Cuthwulf, King of the Middle Saxons, conqueror of the great forest of the south, lord of the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky, son of Cuthwine, son of Hors, son of Fethre, son of Seaxneat, son of Woden the Wide-Famed, father of hosts, beginner of journeys and finder of truth, welcome you, Pascent, former son of the former King of the Britons, Vortigern the Accursed, to my tribe, my clan and my family. I swear by Almighty God, the King of Glory, and his son Jesus, the Prince of the Earth, to share with you my fame and my wealth. Yours shall be the golden rings and the golden mead, the fertile lands and the fertile women. All this I swear before Almighty God to you, Pascent, my son.'

He took a long, slow drink from the horn and passed it to the woman who had brought it into the hall. She held it over the fire for a moment, and then handed it to Pascent. The half-full horn was warm to the touch, and the mead inside looked dark.

'I will be loyal,' Pascent said miserably. 'I'll be your son.'

'You must say more,' said Eoppa. 'You must swear by God. You must bind your soul to this oath.'

Pascent looked down at the mead, feeling a hollow within him. A part of him again just wanted to be killed quickly.

'You must swear it, Pascent.'

Eoppa's voice was urgent now, but as warm and benign as ever. Pascent felt a stab of guilt. He couldn't let Eoppa down after all the kindness he'd shown him.

'I swear by Almighty God and by the Lord Jesus to be your son and your loyal warrior for ever and ever.'

As Eoppa translated his words to the king in an appropriately florid manner, Pascent drank a deep draught of the mead. As soon as the liquid hit his quivering stomach he vomited it back up again, covering his sleeves and the sacred horn in the mess.

There were gasps around him from the people in the hall. Eoppa's face had turned very pale. Cuthwulf looked at Pascent silently with the whites of his eyes visible all the way around the irises. Then he burst into his horrible laugh again, and the rest of the Saxons in the hall nervously followed suit.

'It is good,' he said. 'Now take my new son to meet his brother.'

X

Eldol awoke to the vicious sunlight with an imprecise but crippling feeling of dread. He had drunk too eagerly the night before, and his head hurt when he moved.

He was wound up in the sheets of what he supposed must be Alauna's bed, since the few bits and pieces left in the room had certainly belonged to a woman. Whoever had ransacked the house during the riot must have taken everything else. The furniture was all upended, and in the corner of the room there was a dark tapering stain on the wall. Upon reflection, however, Eldol could not be certain that the stain was not of his own making. He had only the faintest memory of going to bed.

Vortigern and Lestin were already awake. Eldol could hear the murmur of their voices in the courtyard outside. When he sat up he felt the room spin around him and he melted back into the hot sheets with a groan. He could not be certain, but he had no specific memory of doing anything to disgrace himself the night before. What recollections he had were dominated by Lestin and the stories he had told over the wine and salted beef they found in the kitchen. Lestin had turned out to be an amusing fellow, and he had made the evening a surprisingly pleasant one. It was strange to think that only an hour earlier Eldol had come very close to beating him to death.

Lestin was a dog breeder from Venta Belgarum, though not a particularly successful one. Over dinner he had told Eldol and Vortigern how, not very long ago, he had lost a potentially lucrative order from none other than the magistrate Balatus.

'I was surprised to hear he was thinking of buying from me,' he said. 'But some time last autumn, this fellow came to see me from the basilica. The magistrate was keen on dog fighting, and he used to spend a lot of money on it. Putting on fights for his friends and so on. So this fellow comes asking if he could arrange for his lordship to come round and inspect the dogs, maybe with a view to putting in a big order. Of course, I was thrilled.

'A few days later the magistrate came to visit us. Me and the wife were dressed in our best, and the kids were scrubbed as clean as we could get them.' Lestin paused, and his eyes shone mournfully in the firelight. 'We'd cleared the yard out too, got it looking as nice as we could for the magistrate. Or so we thought. The magistrate was marching around like this—'

Lestin got to his feet and strutted around the table with his arms behind his back, his face pinched into an earnest look. His audience laughed appreciatively.

'So the magistrate was walking around like this with his nose in the air, and right in his path was the biggest pile of dog muck I've ever seen in my life. I don't know how we missed it. I saw him heading straight for it, and I just froze up.

'So of course he stepped right in it, and I swear it came right up to his ankle. It was all

dripping off the top of his shoe. So he looked down at it, and his face turned purple. “What’s that?” he was shouting, as if he really didn’t know. I was trying to think of something to say, and then the kids started laughing. I didn’t know where to look. Then the wife started laughing, and then that set me off as well... I couldn’t help myself. The four of us were near rolling around on the floor. The magistrate didn’t find it funny, though. He just stormed out of the yard, and we never saw him again.’

Remembering the story cheered Eldol up a little, but then it was washed away under a fresh inundation of shame. He was ashamed for laughing at the dead magistrate, for having got drunk, and for beating Lestin. Then he remembered that they were being hunted, and the shame became irrelevant.

The door creaked open, and Lestin peered in. The night had not been kind to him. His face had blossomed into a livid mess of swellings and bruises.

‘Morning. The wagon’s all loaded up and ready to go.’

‘Thank you,’ said Eldol. ‘I’ll be out in a moment.’

Lestin closed the door, and Eldol got out of bed. He had slept in his clothes but had, thankfully, managed to get his boots and sword belt off before going to sleep. He put these on again and went out into the courtyard. Here the cruel sunlight hit him with all its might, and he almost whimpered as he joined Vortigern at the side of the wagon. It was a big four-wheeled vehicle with an arched roof, harnessed to a single horse, and there was just enough room at the front for a driver to sit.

‘Good morning, my lord,’ said Eldol almost inaudibly.

‘Good morning,’ said Vortigern, and the amused crinkles around his eyes told Eldol just how dishevelled he must look. ‘Did you sleep well?’

‘Yes, thank you.’

Lestin climbed onto the driver’s seat and took the reins in his hands.

‘Well, we’re all set. We’ve got enough food in there to last us a day or two, I think. I’m afraid you’ll have to ride in the back with the dogs. It’s actually quite comfortable back there once you get used to the smell.’

Vortigern and Eldol clambered into the back of the wagon, and there was an immediate, head-splitting chorus of barking, growling and snarling. Five or six wooden cages were piled against the front inner wall. Yellow eyes watched the passengers hungrily from behind the bars. In the back section there were a few blankets and sacks of straw that would serve as cushions.

Lestin’s disembodied voice came now through the front wall.

‘Don’t worry, they’ll get used to you. Be sure to keep your fingers out of those cages, though; they haven’t been fed in a while. Right then, off we go!’

With a jolt the wagon began to move forward. Eldol reclined on one of the sacks of straw and glanced over at Vortigern.

‘My lord,’ he said quietly. ‘Are you sure we’ve done the right thing?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Lestin. Can we trust him?’

The old man, who had been watching the road roll away behind them with a look of quiet optimism, now frowned.

‘Yes. However honest he may or may not be, he’s afraid of us. But he may yet turn out to

be a valuable friend.' The frown faded away again. 'After all, I haven't known you for very long, have I? I do believe we are over the worst, Eldol. Soon we'll be in Venta Silurum, and we'll be safe.'

'I hope so, my lord, I really do. Who's in charge there?'

'No one at the moment, at least not officially. My son Britu was the magistrate before he went off to attack Hengest's lands. Since then, one of his tribunes has been running things, a fellow called Iniris. He's a trustworthy lad from a good family, just the sort of fellow we need on our side. In fact he's due to marry my granddaughter soon. You've been to Venta Silurum before, have you not?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Well, then you've seen those great stone walls and towers all around the town. Hengest doesn't stand a chance of getting in there. Iniris will be able to help us regroup and find a way to rally those still loyal to our cause. It won't stop with us, you know. Whatever madness has seized Hengest, he won't be satisfied simply with killing me. The day of reckoning is coming for the whole island.'

The old politician was making speeches again, but he seemed to be taking some strength from his own bleak words. The thought of facing Hengest and his barbarians did not stir up any noble sentiments in Eldol. Still, the wooden walls of the wagon gave him a feeling of security, and the effect of being able to travel along the road unseen was very restful. Before long Eldol curled up on the makeshift cushions and dozed off.

Some time later they arrived in Port Abona. Decades ago it had been the main point for ferrying soldiers across the Sabren Estuary to Venta Silurum and Isca. Now it had dwindled to a semi-derelict village scattered along a muddy riverbank. The water was low, and a lonely boat sat banked in the dirt by the wharf. Any warmth from the sun was snatched away by the deafening winds that howled upstream from the sea and barrelled into the newcomers when they got out of the wagon.

'This is it?' said Eldol, shouting to make himself heard over the wind.

'I know it isn't much to look at,' said Lestin. 'It's often a bit livelier in the night time.'

'How do you mean?'

'They used to ship the soldiers across here. You still get some of the less savoury entertainments, the sort of things you don't get in the bigger towns further inland.'

'Oh yes?'

'Well, you know what soldiers are like when you turn them loose for a night. They spend so much time cooped up with one another.'

Now that Lestin mentioned it, Eldol remembered how the soldiers in Glevum would sometimes talk about having been to Port Abona on their leave days.

'And how does a dog breeder from Venta Belgarum know about this little den of vice?' said Vortigern, amused.

Lestin feigned embarrassment.

'My lord! As it happens, this little den of vice used to account for a lot of my business in slow seasons. Soldiers love dog fights. I used to sell some of my lower quality animals to these travellers that used to meet here. They'd put on games for the soldiers and they'd fleece them out of all their wages.'

'Same as it ever was. Eldol, let's have a look around the wharf and see if we can't find

someone to take us across. Lestin, would you mind waiting here with the wagon?’

Eldol and Vortigern went to the end of the wharf and looked down at the boat they had seen from the headland. It was a fishing vessel, full of nets and dirty old blankets, stuck fast in the mud and tethered to the wharf. It was shabby and reeked of fish, but it looked seaworthy enough.

‘I wonder who it belongs to,’ said Eldol.

‘My guess is that it belongs to a fisherman,’ said Vortigern in monotone.

‘Well, the owner isn’t here at any rate. What’s to stop us taking it?’

‘Do you know how to pilot a boat? Neither do I. Lestin doesn’t strike me as much of a sailor, either.’

Eldol wondered if he was beginning to get on Vortigern’s nerves.

‘I can hear you, you know,’ said a voice below them, and a wizened face appeared from under one of the guano-spotted blankets on the deck.

‘Hello there, my good man,’ Vortigern called down to him. ‘We may have some business for you. Is there somewhere we can talk?’

‘Like where?’

‘Well, like your home, for instance. Where do you live?’

The fisherman threw back the blanket and sat up.

‘I live *here*. I was asleep before you two started stamping around and shouting. What do you want?’

‘I’m sorry to have disturbed you. We need to get across the estuary to Venta Silurum rather urgently. I wonder if you might be able to help us.’

‘You’d have to wait for the water to rise. And it’d cost you.’

‘Naturally. What sort of fee would you consider reasonable?’

‘Ten silver mills.’

Eldol and Vortigern exchanged a look. The boat itself could not have been worth that much.

‘Well...’ Vortigern began.

‘Ten silver mills,’ the fisherman repeated, and he got to his feet. ‘That’s how much it costs. You said yourself you can’t get the boat across the water without me.’

‘Oh, come now. Where on earth do you think we are going to find ten *miliarensia*?’

The fisherman shrugged and turned away from them.

‘Rob someone. Bet on the dog fights tonight. Sell your arses. What do I care?’

Then he began rooting among his nets as if he had already forgotten they were there.

‘What are we going to do?’ said Eldol as they walked back up the wharf. ‘We can’t get hold of that kind of money.’

Vortigern sighed.

‘We’ll see. Let’s talk to Lestin about it.’

‘Right,’ said Lestin, when they met him back at the wagon. ‘So he said there’d be dog fights in town tonight?’

‘Yes,’ said Vortigern. ‘Could you enter one of your dogs, perhaps?’

‘Those ones I’ve got back there are watchdogs. They bark loud and look mean, but a fighting dog would tear the lot of them to pieces.’

‘So do you have any ideas?’

‘I do, as it happens.’ Lestin took something out of the leather pouch on his belt and pressed it into Vortigern’s hand. ‘Now, that’s all I’ve got in the world, my lord.’

Vortigern looked in his hand and counted out five silver miliarensia, irregularly cut and of different weights, each stamped with the profile of the long-dead Emperor Honorius. It amounted to a month’s wages for a soldier in the Londinium garrison.

‘This won’t be enough. The fisherman wants twice this amount.’

‘Like I said, I’ve got an idea. I think we can get the rest of the money tonight.’

‘What do you have in mind?’

‘We wait for the usual crowd to arrive. Eldol and I will keep out of sight. You, my lord, will go to the dog fight and put that money on the dog that’s going to win. Like I said, it’s always fixed. I’ll be able to tell you which one is going to win when I see them.’

‘Why have we got to stay out of sight?’ said Eldol.

‘We’d give the game away. I can’t put the money on the winner because they might know me. You can’t, my lord consiliar, because you’re a bit intimidating to say the least. You’d only put them on their guard. My lord Vortigern here, if he’ll forgive me for saying so, doesn’t look like a threat. They’ll take a winning bet from him. If there’s a decent-sized crowd there tonight, they’ll pay what they owe. If not, we might have to try a different approach.’

‘A different approach,’ Eldol echoed glumly. ‘I know what that means.’

Evening came quickly, hastened by their apprehension. They waited in an alley between the long-disused buildings around the town square and watched the newcomers arrive. Wagons rolled in, and men piled out to unload barrels and set up tables.

Lestin pointed to two men who were fixing up some wooden barriers in a rough square.

‘There they are, two of the regulars who run the dog fights. Damn it, those ones know me well. Nechtan and Brude, their names are.’

‘What kind of names are those?’ said Eldol.

‘Pictish names,’ said Vortigern.

The sound of the word went through Eldol like the memory of a nightmare. It recalled a child’s fear of the dark, coming as it did from the shadows of his infancy. He had heard all about the savagery of the Picts when he was a little boy. Back then the Britons seemed to be constantly at war with them, but Eldol had never actually seen one before. Even at this distance he could see well enough to confirm that they did not have blue skin or horns, contrary to what his nursemaid had told him.

For a long time nothing much happened. A few transient figures flitted through the town, casting lingering looks at the beer barrels, the dog pit and the prostitutes.

‘It doesn’t usually take this long to get going,’ said Lestin. ‘Usually there’s plenty of soldiers in the square by this time.’

‘Tonight will be different, I think,’ said Vortigern. ‘Leave will have been cancelled for soldiers in most of the southern towns. They’ll be preparing their defences and waiting for Hengest to come.’

‘So where does that leave us?’ said Eldol.

No one answered him.

Eventually the square began to fill up a little. There was a glint of firelight on metal, and two dirty and unshaven soldiers appeared in the midst of the sparse crowd. They made

straight for the beer tent.

‘At last,’ said Lestin. ‘I wonder what town they’re from.’

‘It hardly matters,’ said Vortigern. ‘They’re deserters, obviously. Is it time, do you think?’

‘No, not yet, my lord. I need to have a good look at the dogs. Let’s wait for the crowd to get a bit thicker around the pit, and then we can move in a bit closer. If either of the two Picts sees me with you, then the game’s up.’

XI

Nechtán, the elder of the two Picts, watched while his brother checked the fastenings that secured the barriers around the dog pit.

He was annoyed with Brude, but it did not show on his face. It never did. Nechtán had spent so many years grinning at people to put them at ease that it took a conscious effort for him to make any other expression.

Nechtán looked older than he was. He was about forty, he supposed. It was hard to keep track of the years. He must have been ten or eleven years old when the soldiers killed his parents and burnt down their house, and that had been about thirty years ago.

There was nothing he could have done, of course. The Britons (or Romans, as they had still called themselves back then) took all the children out of the village and made them stand shoulder to shoulder in a line, arranging them in order of height. Their leader gestured towards a certain point in the line and said something in either Latin or Britannic. Even today Nechtán still remembered the sound of the swords being drawn. The bigger boys were killed on the spot. The girls were taken away and never seen again.

Brude was about two years old when their parents were killed. He did not have the same instinctive fear of Britons that Nechtán had. He would wink at the Briton women and argue with the men, and it was always down to Nechtán to get him out of trouble.

‘I know you’re watching me,’ he said now. ‘You’re putting me off. Do you want me to do it right or not?’

‘Of course,’ said Nechtán.

‘Well then, stop watching me.’

‘I’m not watching you. But that top one’s not fastened tightly enough.’

Brude turned around and glared at him. Nechtán spread his hands.

‘All right, suit yourself. You do as you like. But if another one of those dogs escapes...’

He looked up at the Britons who had gathered around the dog pit and let his face fall into the placating smile that had probably kept him alive for so long.

They had been coming to Port Abona for years now. The big garrison towns of Glevum and Corinium were close by, so there were usually plenty of soldiers in the area who were eager to spend their wages. But it was a thin crowd tonight. Nechtán knew trouble had been brewing in the east. Maybe the local troops had all been mobilised. If so, he and Brude wouldn’t make much money tonight.

They had six dogs scheduled to fight as usual. In each of the first two bouts, two evenly matched dogs would be pitted against each other. The odds were small and few bets would be made. It was always the third bout that made all the money. People were excited and

loosened up by then, and they nearly always backed the wrong dog. It was all a matter of appearances. The winner had to look like a loser.

After the second bout the brothers were on a small loss of two miliarensia. This was perfectly normal, but when they opened the cages for the third bout, Nechtan had a feeling that something was wrong. He looked at the fastenings on the barriers. Brude had fixed them securely after all. Then his eye fell on two very drunk soldiers who had appeared at the side of the pit. He could feel trouble approaching. Still, it didn't show on his face.

'Taking money again, my friends!' he shouted, half-swallowing the words as he spoke them. He could speak Britannic perfectly well when he wanted to, but no one liked a clever Pict. 'Who want making bet? White Molossian against red Pugnax! Who want making bet, my friends?'

Some of the Britons thrust their arms over the barrier towards him, shaking their fists so that the money jingled inside.

'One on the Pugnax!'

'One silver on the Pugnax.'

'Give me one mill on the red one!'

'Thank you, my friend,' Nechtan said to each of them, memorising the bets while Brude took coins from the punters.

'One on the red Pugnax'

'One mill on the red dog.'

'One silver mill on the Pugnax, Pict.'

'Four on the Molossian, my good man.'

Nechtan's grin dimmed to about half its usual lustre. The last speaker was an elderly man with kind blue eyes who stood next to one of the drunken soldiers. Nechtan touched a finger to his ear.

'Didn't hearing, my friend.'

'I said I would like to put four miliarensia on the Molossian to win, my good man. The white dog.'

'Four is much money, my friend. Big odds against Molossian.'

'So I will get a lot of money if I win. Yes, I would like to put four on the Molossian.'

The smile flickered and then faded out. *He knew.*

'Yes, my friend...'

Brude took the coins from the old man, oblivious to the disaster which threatened them.

'Are you barmy?' said the soldier next to the old man. 'Four silver mills on that mangy old Molossian over there?'

'I have a feeling about it,' said the old man with a shrug.

'But it's fighting a Pugnax! Look at it, it's a monster!'

The white dog was a Molossian that the brothers had been starving for a few days to make it look weak and fight hard. Although they were experienced handlers, the brothers were both a little afraid of it. The Molossian's opponent for this bout was an enormous animal with rust-coloured fur, supposedly a Pugnax. Pugnaces were bred only in Venta Belgarum, and were considered the best fighting breed in the world. Even now people sometimes came from as far as Constantinopolis to buy them. But this particular animal was, in fact, a cheap half-breed. It didn't stand a chance against the Molossian.

‘I have a feeling about it,’ Vortigern repeated, for of course it was he.

‘A feeling?’

Vortigern had got the two soldiers drunk. The single coin he had spent at the beer tent had gone a long way, and before long they were comfortable enough to talk. They had refused to tell him their names or where they had been stationed, unsurprisingly. The punishment for desertion was to be stripped and beaten to death by one’s own unit.

‘So your unit was mobilised.’

‘Yes.’

‘But your town wasn’t attacked.’

‘No. At least not while we were there.’

‘And where are the troops from your town going?’

‘To fight the Saxons.’

‘Which Saxons?’

‘The ones in Cantia. I think their king is called Henwulf, or Henfrid, or...’

‘Hengest. But they’re Jutes, not Saxons.’

‘They’re heathens at any rate, whatever they call themselves.’

‘Quite so. So, were you told why you were being mobilised?’

‘There was an attack at a ruined fort near Sorviodunum. A lot of people killed, our decurion said.’

‘Did he tell you that Vortigern had been killed?’

‘Who?’

‘Vortigern.’

‘Never heard of him.’

‘Come now, you must have. He is the head of the Consilium.’

‘What’s a consilium?’

It was a disquieting question. Vortigern might have expected it from a ploughman or swineherd, but a soldier was expected to have some idea of the world outside his town.

‘Surely you can’t be serious, my good man. The Consilium decides the laws of the land!’

‘But who are they?’

‘Well, most of the consiliars are magistrates who govern the towns. Some are officials from Londinium, and some others are from the army... I will explain it this way: who is it that gives you your orders?’

‘The prefect.’

‘Good. Now who gives the prefect orders?’

‘The magistrate.’

‘And who gives the magistrate orders?’

‘Er... the bishop, I suppose.’

Vortigern paused.

‘The bishop? Who, then, gives the bishop orders?’

‘The Bishop of Roma, of course. And then after him it’s God.’

And the soldier had looked very solemn when he said this, and very pleased at having established a direct chain of command between himself and the Creator. Now he was so drunk he could barely stand.

‘You’ve convinced me,’ he slurred. ‘One silver on the white dog!’

‘Me too,’ said the other soldier. ‘One on the white.’

‘Brude, stop where you are!’ Nechtan shouted in Pictish. ‘No more bets!’

‘No more?’

Brude had already taken the two miliarensia from the deserters.

‘The payout’s too big. We don’t have that much even if we throw in our savings from the wagon.’

‘So you want me to stop taking bets?’

Nechtan grinned in anguish.

‘Oh, gods preserve us... No, we’ll have to keep taking them. It’s the only way we might be able to cover the payout. You’ll have to carry on.’

They took only one more bet for the red mongrel, but thankfully no more for the Molossian. Brude joined Nechtan when he had collected the last of the stakes.

‘I don’t know what you’re so worried about,’ he said, handing his older brother the money. ‘It’s not our fault if we can’t cover it. We just divide the pot between the winners.’

‘We can’t do that, Brude. You can’t set up a fight with big odds and not pay out.’

‘Then we throw the fight the other way.’

‘How do you think we’re going to do that? If they realise it’s fixed they’ll kill us.’

‘To hell with them!’ said Brude, bringing his face up close to his brother’s. ‘Where are your balls, Nechtan? If running away from everything was the only thing keeping us alive, I’d rather be dead!’

Lestin and Eldol sidled into the square from the alleyway, with the hoods of their cloaks up and their heads held low. By the time they got to the dog pit, the fight was underway. They lurked behind the other spectators and watched.

The red dog was bigger than the Molossian, but it was clearly the weaker animal. The white dog forced it back further and further, and when the yellowed fangs fastened around its throat, the red dog’s eyes seemed to meet Eldol’s. Eldol thought he could see sadness in the fading eyes, and incomprehension. Then he scolded himself for his fancy, and the dog’s face became expressionless again as it died. The white dog continued to shake it by the throat.

Brude stepped cautiously into the dog pit with a crook and began the task of trying to get a muzzle on the victor. The punters groaned and commiserated one another, shuffling away from the barrier. Nechtan stepped into the pit. Brude had got the muzzle on the dog, but he was having a hard time dragging it out through the gate.

‘No more fight, my friends,’ said Nechtan, grinning at Vortigern and the two soldiers, who remained at the barrier. ‘Very sorry. No taking enough of money to pay full winning. Odds too big, bets too small. Here is all money we take, splitting up between you.’

He pressed some coins into the hands of Vortigern and the soldiers. Each now held four mills. The soldiers looked delighted, and they began to edge away.

‘Wait,’ said Vortigern. ‘That is no good. I gave you four miliarensia, and I have won no money. That will not do at all.’

‘Please, my friend,’ said Nechtan. ‘Can’t help. Can’t giving money if no having money. Very sorry.’

‘Look here!’ said Vortigern, raising his voice. The soldiers stopped, seeming to understand that the old man was being fleeced. ‘If I had lost the bet, you would have kept my money. But I won the bet at steep odds. You don’t take wagers at high odds unless you can

pay people their winnings. Not unless the fight is fixed and you intend to cheat people. Is that the case?’

Nechtán pointed to his ear again.

‘Sorry. Not much Britannic. No understanding.’

‘Understand this, then,’ said Vortigern in good Pictish. ‘I heard every word that passed between you and your brother. Now, I am not alone here, my good man. Fetch me the money you owe, or you will not leave this place alive.’

Nechtán looked at the soldiers, who in fact didn’t seem too put out. They had made a huge profit, and seemed at most mildly disapproving. Perhaps this could be resolved without bloodshed, and without losing all the money stashed in the wagon. He held up his hands in a placating gesture and spoke in Pictish to Vortigern.

‘I honestly can’t pay you the full amount, sir, but let’s talk about it. Perhaps we can reach an agreement.’

But now the disaster that had been shadowing Nechtán all evening finally bounded into view. Brude appeared with a naked blade in his hand. He lunged across the barrier, wild-eyed, and grabbed the front of Vortigern’s tunic.

‘You listen to me, you old fool. We’re not paying you anything! If you don’t get out of my sight right now, I’m going to cut your throat!’

The drunken soldiers no longer looked quite so impartial. One jumped-up Pict was well within their capabilities. Nechtán let out a moan as they drew their swords.

‘No! No! Don’t kill my brother!’

Eldol watched with a feeling of hopelessness. The shouting rose in his ears until he could no longer think. Without really knowing what he was doing, he rushed forward to the barrier and planted himself between Brude and the two soldiers. Then he punched Brude in the face as hard as he could. The Pict toppled over like a felled tree, without bending at the waist or knees, and the knife landed harmlessly a few feet away.

Vortigern burst into a throaty laugh.

‘*Fetch the money!*’ Eldol roared at Nechtán, so loudly that his head hurt from the strain. He drew his sword with a wrench. ‘All of it! This is your last chance!’

The soldiers stared up at Eldol, immobile. The fight had gone right out of them.

‘I’ll get it for you now,’ said Nechtán. ‘No tricks, I promise.’

He scurried out of the dog pit towards his wagon. Brude lay unconscious in the dust. Vortigern was still laughing.

‘Well done, my boy!’ he said when he caught his breath. ‘Well done!’

XII

It finally rained that night, hard and heavy. The three men huddled in the back of the wagon with the dogs, bending into ever more uncomfortable positions to avoid one another's legs and feet. None of them slept well, but the never-ending tattoo of the rain on the roof made them glad to be where they were.

In the morning they drove the wagon across the sodden earth to the wharf, and found that the rising water had lifted the fisherman's boat clear out of the mud. It was dry and sunny now. At the sound of their approach, the fisherman appeared again from under the piles of blankets and nets on the deck.

'What do you want? I'm trying to sleep!'

'Good morning,' said Vortigern. 'We have decided to accept your proposal. As soon as you are ready we will set off for Venta Silurum. We couldn't quite manage ten miliarensia, I'm afraid. Would eight suffice?'

'Eight?'

The fisherman's eyes widened. It dawned on them that he had only named such a high sum to get rid of them. He would have accepted a much smaller payment if they had offered it. This changed everything.

A peremptory tone came into Vortigern's voice.

'Yes, eight miliarensia. You'll have half now, and the other half when we land. I trust this will be satisfactory?'

'Yes, yes, sir,' said the fisherman, getting out of the makeshift bed and pawing at his grimy clothes with even grimmer hands. 'That's very satisfactory, sir. Please, get on board. We can go right now.'

'Thank you. Firstly, though, we must get our wagon on board.'

'Wagon? You don't mean with horses?'

'We have one horse, yes. And several dogs.'

'Dogs?' The fisherman was aghast. 'On my boat? Can't allow it! Never!'

Vortigern paused. 'But why not?'

'Because they're dirty! What's more, they're unlucky. Won't do to take dogs across the sea. Makes her angry.'

Eldol remembered his brother once saying that it was harder to preach to sailors than to anyone else, since they lived too close to the elements to be wholly Christian. No theological argument could shake them from their superstitions. But silver was persuasive. The fisherman continued to grumble about the weight of the wagon, and how low the boat sat in the water with it on board, but when Vortigern gave him half of his fee his grumbling died down. They

set off.

It occurred to Eldol that he had never been on a boat before. He would have liked to be given some task to do, to make himself useful, but the fisherman forbade them from touching anything. The matter of the money aside, as long as they were on the boat the fisherman was in charge. He darted back and forth from the prow to the steering oar, as quick and sure-footed as a ship's rat, while the vessel rocked around the last bends of the Abona and out onto the Sabren Estuary. Here Eldol's first attack of seasickness took hold. He flopped onto the deck, shivering, trying his hardest not to vomit in front of the others.

'Seasick, my lord?' said Lestin. 'A big fellow like you?'

'Get out of the way!' said the fisherman as he stepped over Eldol to get to the steering oar. 'Don't lie on your side if you're sick. Lie on your back. Keep your eyes closed.'

Eldol dragged himself over to the edge of the deck, next to the wale, and lay flat. The fisherman's advice was good. Before long the seasickness abated, and Eldol opened his eyes again. The sky was now a surly patchwork of dark greys. Soon he felt raindrops on his face, and the rocking of the boat became more pronounced and erratic. He decided he had better stay where he was.

'Right,' the fisherman shouted to the others over the rising wind. 'Didn't see this coming. Need some help now. You, sir. Grab hold of this. We need to get that sail pulled up, or else we'll capsize. That's it. Now you, sir. Get hold of this bucket.'

The rocking got worse, and Eldol closed his eyes again. Somewhere ahead of him he felt the great weight of the wagon shift on the deck. The din of the waves grew louder.

'Keep a tight hold! Now, pull! Put your back into it!'

He was getting wet. The deck underneath him was covered in water, and it was seeping through his cloak into his tunic. He half sat up, almost involuntarily.

'Eldol,' Vortigern shouted. 'We need your help now, even if you are ill.'

The old man stood near the prow, bailing out bucketfuls of water while waves splashed back at him over the wale. Lestin was amidships, pulling at a rope which appeared to be gathering up one side of the sail towards the yardarm.

'Get up,' said the fisherman, who was all of a sudden standing over Eldol. 'Help your friend with the other line.'

Eldol struggled to get up as the deck jerked and pitched under his feet. He thudded over the wet planks after the fisherman. Now the rain was coming down in grey sheets all around the boat. They could not see the sun, or the horizon, or even the sea itself beyond a hundred yards in any direction. The fisherman gathered up a length of rope from the deck and thrust it into Eldol's hands.

'Quickly, get a tight hold. Now pull.'

Eldol threw all his weight into the rope, and his side of the sail began to inch up towards the yardarm. The fisherman appeared again by the prow, and he began to shout and gesticulate at Vortigern. The old man looked puzzled. At first Eldol could not hear what was being said, but then the noise of the waves subsided a little.

'What have you done?' the fisherman yelled, pointing his finger in Vortigern's face. 'The sea doesn't change just like that, not for no reason. There's something you haven't told me. Are you a murderer? A heretic? What is it?'

'You're mistaken,' said Vortigern. 'I've done nothing wrong.'

‘It’s you. You’re a curse to anyone who tries to help you!’

Vortigern returned the fisherman’s gaze firmly but without aggression. It seemed to do the trick. The fisherman continued to upbraid him, but the threat had gone out of his voice, and soon he stalked back up to the stern. A wave crashed onto the deck and sent up a cloud of spray. Eldol could not see the old man’s face any more, but he saw his shoulders sink with what might equally have been relief or dejection.

All of a sudden the storm ended. The rain went away as quickly as it had come. Overhead the sun blazed giddily as if the whole thing had been a joke, making blinding reflections in the puddles on the deck. The boat no longer bounced on the waves with such alarming urgency, and the wind abandoned its campaign to tear the clewlines out of Eldol and Lestin’s grasp. The fisherman told them to let the sail back down.

Now they could see land not too far ahead. The prow of the boat nodded on the water, as though it were satisfied with a job well done, and they cut through the shallows south of Venta Silurum.

‘Is there a way to slow down?’ Lestin called to the fisherman, who stood holding the steering oar. There was no reply.

‘I don’t think he heard you,’ said Eldol, squinting in the harsh light.

‘No. Something’s wrong.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Look, do you see how the oar’s propping him up? Wait here, I’ll check.’

Lestin stepped carefully between the puddles and nets strewn across the deck. As he approached the stern, the boat abruptly stopped, and everyone on board was thrown to the deck. The wagon strained at the ropes that held it in place, threatening to roll loose and crush everything in its path, and the horse went into a noisy panic.

After they had collected themselves, the three travellers got to their feet and gathered around the fisherman. He now lay on his back between the mast and the steering oar. His eyes were open and dull, and his face was flushed with a mesh of tiny purple lines. Whatever it was that so often struck down older men without a moment’s warning, today it had visited the fisherman.

‘Poor fellow,’ said Vortigern.

No one else said anything. Lestin stooped and yanked the purse free from the dead man’s belt, saving Vortigern the indignity of asking him to do so.

‘Are we going to bury him?’ said Eldol quietly.

‘There’s no time,’ said Vortigern. ‘We could say a prayer over the body if you like.’

After a hurried ‘Our Father’, they left the fisherman’s body to the gulls. It took a while to get the wagon off the boat. They found a track a little way down the shore which took them up over the bluff, and then the horse dragged them bumping over the sparse grass towards the town.

Venta Silurum was the biggest town west of the Sabren, and from the southern approach it was an imposing sight. The fortifications were without equal in that part of the country. The south wall rose up like a cliff face from the fields, and along its length the great D-shaped towers kept vigil over the land. Lestin was the only one of the travellers who could see it, but he communicated the effect to the others in the back of the wagon.

‘We’ll be all right here, I think. You should see these walls. There’s no way the heathens

could ever take this place!’

In the back, Vortigern swatted Eldol’s arm good-naturedly.

‘You see? I told you it was a good idea to come here.’

‘I know, my lord. I’ve been tending to expect the worst lately.’

‘Perfectly understandable, my boy. You wait and see, the soldiers in Glevum will break the siege soon enough. My men in Londinium will raise our army against Hengest, and you’ll be safe in your own bed before you know it. Lestin, how far are we from the gate?’

‘Should be there in a moment or two, my lord.’

‘Good. Can you see any guards at the gatehouse?’

‘Just the one.’

‘Good. We must continue to be careful for now. Lestin—if he asks, just tell him that you’ve come to sell dogs at the market. Don’t mention that we’re in the back here.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

The wagon soon came to the south gate, where a guard leant on his spear, fanning himself with the brass helmet in his hand. Lestin reined the horse in.

‘Good afternoon, sir. I’ve come to sell my dogs at the market.’

‘So?’

The guard waved Lestin on through the gateway.

Eldol and Vortigern could not see much from the back of the wagon, but they could hear well enough. There were a great many people around them. The wagon stopped, and then Lestin’s face appeared at the back.

‘The streets are too crowded. There’s no way I can get the wagon through.’

‘Then we shall walk,’ said Vortigern. ‘It isn’t far to the basilica. Can you secure the wagon here, Lestin?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

The streets were crammed with people as far as they could see. The atmosphere was one of celebration. Fathers ambled along with their children on their shoulders, and snatches of song came and went on the air. Banners flew from upper windows, painted with slogans which were, of course, meaningless to Eldol.

‘What is this?’ said Lestin. ‘Is there a festival today?’

‘So it seems,’ said Vortigern. ‘But I haven’t the slightest idea what the occasion is. I wonder if... perhaps my granddaughter has got married today. Perhaps Iniris has finally been made magistrate. That might explain it.’

Eldol looked around at the revellers.

‘There wasn’t a crowd like this when I was made a magistrate.’

‘Perhaps he’s more popular here than I realised. Come, we’ll soon find out.’

The crowd was at its thickest in the town square. The noise of the crowd here was an expectant rumble. The shop fronts along the side of the square were all closed and boarded up, and a group of infantrymen with spears and big round shields stood guard in front of them. There was no way to get through.

Two figures appeared on the balcony above the shop fronts, and the noise from the crowd rose in appreciation. One of them was a tubby man with pink hairless cheeks, whom Eldol thought he recognised from Britu’s funeral. The other was a prefect in parade armour who stepped forward and addressed the crowd.

‘All hail Iniris, King of Venta Silurum!’

The crowd was deafening in its approval.

‘King?’ said Eldol.

Vortigern only watched in silence.

The fat man stepped to the rail of the balcony with his arms held aloft. The noise from the crowd went on, and some of the people at the front threw flowers. Eventually the cheers died down, and the fat man spoke.

‘Today it is done. The throne has been left empty since the death of our beloved king, Britu. The task he began, the task of ridding the east of the heathens, was cut short by his betrayal and murder. Today his work will be resumed. His great victories must be built upon, and I, Iniris, his son-in-law and most trusted adviser, assume his burden. I will lead our men into battle from the front line.’

‘My lord,’ said Eldol. ‘I don’t understand what’s happening.’

Vortigern shushed him irritably.

‘We will not be standing alone against the heathens,’ Iniris continued. ‘Now that we have thrown off the yoke fastened around our necks by the Consilium, we are free to act. No longer will our actions be dictated by effete politicians hundreds of miles away. The Consilium is weak and corrupt, and the loyal citizens of all dominions will stand as one without it. Our triumph is assured, for God has sent His representative to fight shoulder to shoulder with us, as promised.’

Another figure now appeared on the balcony next to Iniris, and the people lost all control of themselves at the sight of him. They became hysterical, rolling their eyes as they shouted alleluias, hosannas and anything else they thought appropriate.

That distinguished visitor was a tall, bearded man of around Vortigern’s age. He wore gleaming white robes emblazoned with the Chi-Rho symbol, and a chunky gold cross hung at his chest. The crowd fell silent as the stranger stepped to the rail. Eldol felt Vortigern clutch at his forearm.

‘We need to get out. We’re in terrible danger. *Right now! Move!*’

They made their way out of the square, apologising and smiling at the people they had to push past. When they reached the wagon Vortigern hurriedly climbed into the back. He was shaking.

‘Are you all right, my lord?’ said Lestin.

‘Yes. At least I will be when we get out of here.’

‘Who was that up there?’

The old man shook his head dazedly.

‘That was Germanus, the Bishop of Altisiodorum. I knew he was back in the country, but I never imagined... quickly, Lestin. I must get out of this place before I am recognised.’

They left Venta Silurum with as much haste as was prudent. Eldol was close to tears as he watched the great stone walls, and his hopes with them, shrink into the distance. To the south was the sea, to the east was Hengest, and to the north was the territory conquered by the hostile Scoti. They went west.

When the town of Isca came into view up ahead, Lestin reined in. He took the horse to drink at the river and let the dogs out of their cages to do their business. The dogs bolted, but they were so malnourished that they hardly managed to get fifty yards before they slowed to a

halt, and sank panting and quivering to the ground. Lestin rounded them up one by one, gathering each of them in his arms like starving, reeking babies. Soon they were all back in their cages.

The three travellers shared a meal of stale bread, chewing it as slowly as they could. It was the last of their food.

‘Are you feeling any better, my lord?’ said Eldol.

‘Yes, thank you,’ said Vortigern. ‘Now that we’re out of that place, I can settle a little. That was quite a shock. I never dreamt Iniris would turn against me. How he came crawling to me for help when Britu took all the soldiers out of the garrison! I knew the fat little toad was only marrying my granddaughter to advance himself, but this... Declaring himself king, and of a mere town at that!’

‘What about your granddaughter, my lord?’ said Lestin. ‘Could she not talk some sense into him?’

‘Matruna? Hardly. She’s only eleven years old.’

Eldol and Lestin exchanged an uncomfortable look, which Vortigern saw.

‘It isn’t like that. Noblemen’s daughters often marry young. That’s how alliances are made; it’s the way it has always been.’

‘But will she...’ Lestin faltered. ‘I mean... will they be...’

Eldol interrupted him.

‘But why is Bishop Germanus out to get you, my lord?’

Vortigern swallowed the last of his bread and washed it down with a gulp from Lestin’s water skin.

‘It goes back almost twenty years. We clashed in a spectacular fashion not long after I became head of the Consilium. I was also the Bishop of Londinium at the time.’ He noted the astonishment on Eldol and Lestin’s faces. ‘Hard to imagine now, isn’t it? You’re both too young to know, perhaps, but things were very different then. At that time some of the bishops here followed the Catholic branch of Christianity, and some of us did not. We followed the teachings of Pelagius. Our faith had been more or less eradicated in the Empire, but here it was still going strong.

‘So, the Bishop of Roma back then was Caelestinus. He tended to lock up anyone who disagreed with him, but by that point we hadn’t been part of the Empire for quite some time. We always knew that if the Romans ever beat down the barbarians in Gallia, they might once again turn their attentions to us. But the invasion never came, or at least not the invasion we had been dreading.

‘The trouble turned up on a little boat that docked in Dubris, and at first no one noticed. The Bishop of Roma had sent Germanus to preach here. He went up through Cantia with his followers, preaching in the villages and at the crossroads. We took no notice until they got to Verulamium. The bishop there was my friend Agricola. He was a Pelagian, like me. When Germanus arrived the whole town turned out to see him. One of the tribunes brought out a little girl who pretended to be blind. Germanus pretended to heal her, and then denounced Agricola as a false prophet. The people caught hold of Agricola, and they beat him to death in the town square.

‘So, word of this got back to me, and I decided I’d better try to get things under control. I was already head of the Consilium, but I was still primarily a man of the Church—Bishop

Vitalinus, as they called me then. So I went up with a small entourage of monks and clerks, thinking I'd solve the matter peacefully. I was lucky to get out alive.

'The mob came out into the streets again, but Germanus held them back at first. He challenged me to a debate at the martyr's shrine outside the town walls. I don't mind saying that I'm a fine speaker, and it has often served me well. But it was as pearls before swine. We were arguing our points in front of uneducated men. The subtleties were lost on them. Germanus had another child tucked away, who had been given lines to learn and a part to play, just like the girl who had got Agricola killed. It was a little boy this time, and Germanus introduced him to the crowd as my bastard son.

'He produced this child, as angelic and forlorn and tow-headed as one could wish to see, and he told the crowd that I had fathered this son upon my own daughter. I told them I didn't even have a daughter. They didn't listen. The little boy came towards me with his arms outstretched, while Germanus played up to the audience. Their minds were made up already. Nothing I could say would convince them. I was moments away from being murdered.' Vortigern stared distantly at nothing, as if he were trapped again in that moment. 'So I did the only thing I could: I confessed. I acknowledged the child as my own. I offered to resign as Bishop of Londinium, and I begged Germanus to welcome me back into the bosom of the Church. They hadn't expected that. They had been hoping for another martyr. But Germanus pulled me up off my knees and embraced me, and he whispered in my ear while the crowd were cheering. "Well played, Vitalinus," he said.

'As soon as I got out of there, I made my move. That same night my men burned down the village where Germanus was staying, but he escaped. He was safe in Gallia by the next evening.'

'And you don't know why Bishop Germanus is back?' said Eldol.

Vortigern shook his head.

'Probably for the same reasons as last time. I'm still here, and more people than ever couldn't care less what the Bishop of Roma says. Funny; it's partly Germanus's fault that there are so many heathens here now. After that disaster in Verulamium, I told Hengest to send for more of his countrymen. Soon I had a barbarian army, like the old Emperor in Ravenna.' He let out an ugly laugh. 'And now they've turned on me, like they turned on him. Men shouldn't try to make pets of wolves.'

XIII

The road ran through the little town of Isca, named after the adjacent river but generally called Legion City by the locals. While other places produced iron, or corn, or textiles, Legion City had only ever raised soldiers. It was the way it had always been.

Two years ago, every able-bodied male of military age left Legion City to fight the Jutes in Cantia. Nearly all of them died. Their sons now roamed the streets of Legion City like packs of wild dogs, answerable to no one and afraid of nothing but others like themselves. The women and old men stayed indoors. There was no magistrate, no prefect and no soldiers. Legion City was not a good place for outsiders to be.

All along the southeast wall were rows of whitewashed brick houses, each identical to the next. Boys came out from the doorways and watched as Lestin's wagon went past. They gathered in packs at the street corners. The hard years they had not yet lived already showed on their faces. Some looked more animal than human. Some wore the wisps of what was not yet a moustache, and would not be for some time. The smaller boys yelled profanities to show how tough they were, and the bigger boys watched Lestin in silence, willing him to stop the wagon for just a moment. But Lestin had heard all about Legion City.

Up ahead, a one-legged boy on a crutch stepped out into the road. As the wagon approached, the boy stumbled. The crutch flew out of his grasp and clattered across the stones. He lay directly in the wagon's path.

Lestin did not slow down; instead he drove the horse into a brisk canter. His face was expressionless as the distance closed between the fallen child and the wagon. The noise of the wagon on the road grew louder in Lestin's ears and he braced himself for the impact.

Then the child rolled out of the way and hopped spryly back up onto his foot, shouting after the wagon as it rattled past him. Now Lestin saw the other boys who had been hiding in the alleys on either side of the road. They came out into the street and brandished their weapons after the escaping wagon. A couple of them threw spears, which fell short onto the road.

The twin arches of the northwest gatehouse were close up ahead, and Lestin kept the horse at a canter until they had passed safely through. He was glad he had heard stories about that ruse before. He was even gladder that the one-legged boy had managed to get out of harm's way.

When they came to a wood ten miles or so down the road, Lestin reined in. Through the branches of the overhanging trees he could see men and horses up ahead where the road dipped. Some nagging instinct told him that this meant trouble, and he knew better than to ignore it. He got down from the driver's seat and went around to the back of the wagon.

‘There are people up the road,’ he said. ‘Maybe I should go up ahead on foot and see who they are before we carry on.’

‘I’ll go with you,’ said Eldol.

Vortigern unbuckled his sword belt.

‘In that case you had better take this, Lestin. You might need it, and it is not very much use in my hands. I’ll wait here for you both.’

‘If you’re sure, my lord. Thank you.’

Eldol got out and followed Lestin, who fastened on Vortigern’s sword belt. They went along the ditch at the side of the road, close to the trees, and crept as quietly as they could towards the strangers up ahead. The branches still blocked the party from clear view, but now they could hear voices. Their accents marked them as being local to the area.

‘...hard to hide it, and there’s no way we can sell it on. I mean, I don’t mind taking the horses back to the village, but—’

‘That’s not what I’m saying. What we do with the carriage afterwards is neither here nor there. I’m worried about what happens if someone comes looking for them. There’s bound to be more of them than this.’

‘I know that, but if there’s many more of them around here, and they find our village, then we’ve had it regardless. They won’t leave anyone alive.’

‘If these three have got themselves separated from a bigger group, then sooner or later the rest of the Saxons are going to come looking for them. We can’t waste any—’

A third voice, trembling and foreign-accented, interrupted them.

‘We are not Saxons, I swear to you. Please let us go. At least let the boy go.’

This third voice was answered by the sound of a fist striking flesh, followed by the thudding of boots against a prostrate body.

Then another voice piped up wearily.

‘All right, all right, that’s enough. Let’s get this over with. We don’t all need to be here for this. You lot can take the carriage away. Turpil, Cavet: you two stay behind with me, and we’ll take care of our guests here.’

Eldol and Lestin were now close enough to see some men standing around a horse-drawn carriage at the side of the road. Most of them held a weapon of some kind, and one wore a sword on his belt. They were probably the top people, for what it was worth, in one of the nameless villages that dotted the countryside between Isca and Tamium.

The carriage certainly did not belong to them. It was similar in size and construction to Lestin’s wagon, but gaily painted and ornamented with little glued-on carvings. A representation of the head of Medusa, who looked fittingly aggrieved, glared out from above the driver’s seat. It looked like some sort of rich man’s pleasure-buggy, surely a rare sight even on the streets of Ravenna or Constantinopolis.

Three people knelt at the roadside, bound hand and foot. One was a stout and flustered-looking slave who must have been the driver of the carriage until very recently. The second was a monk, tonsured in the Roman style, with a bloody nose and mud all over his habit. The third was a young boy with blond hair, simply but very neatly dressed, who stared fixedly at the ground. All three had nooses around their necks.

‘What’s happening?’ said Eldol.

Lestin made a sour face.

‘Countryside justice. I hear it happens a lot on this side of the Sabren.’

‘So, then,’ said one of the villagers. ‘We’ll take this contraption back to the village. As soon as we’ve got it hidden away, I’ll be back with the donkey cart for the bodies.’

The monk began to protest again, and one of the villagers gave him a vicious jab in the chest with the end of his staff. He toppled backwards into the ditch. Bound as he was, he could not get back up again, so he wriggled there for a moment like a worm on a hook.

‘Right,’ said the speaker with the weary voice, the one with the sword on his belt. ‘We’ll get this lot sorted out and see you back here. Don’t take too long, but don’t rush either. Send one of your lads ahead to see if the way’s clear.’

‘Right you are, then.’

The villagers crowded into the back of the carriage. One of them got into the driver’s seat, and then they were off through the trees with a creaking of wheels and a snapping of branches. Now there were only the three hangmen left behind on the road with their captives.

‘Please listen to me,’ said the monk’s voice from the ditch. ‘I swear to you that we are not Saxons—’

‘Scoti then,’ the one with the sword shot back.

‘Nor are we Scoti! Look at us, we are Christians! Surely you can see that I am a monk. The boy here is due to take his vows soon also. We are good Roman citizens like you are.’

‘We’re Britons, not Romans.’

‘Britons, then. We are from the colonies in Armorica.’

‘You just said you were Romans. You can’t make your mind up, can you?’

‘But—’

‘You’re telling me tales, aren’t you? Christians? I saw those idols and whatnot you had carved all over your carriage. If I let you go, I could have a whole army of your kind raping my daughters and stealing my cattle. That, or selling us all into slavery in Hibernia. What about your friend here?’ The rustic pointed to the slave. ‘He’s quiet isn’t he?’

‘He does not speak your language,’ said the monk. ‘He is Alemannic.’

‘Alla-what?’

‘From Germania.’

‘Oh-ho! Germania, he says! So this one’s a Saxon, sure enough. String him up, lads.’

‘Don’t!’ the monk cried, beginning to wriggle about again in the ditch. The two subordinate villagers dropped their weapons and dragged the slave to his feet. They threw the rope that was tied around his neck over a nearby branch and pulled it taut.

The slave—who had not understood a word of what was said at the roadside—was hoisted slowly to his death on the wobbling branch. The rope bit into his skin as he rose by creaking increments. He kicked at the air with his bound feet, screamed silently, and barely noticed the indignity of his last erection or the cold spatter that ran down the backs of his legs as he died.

Eldol and Lestin now found themselves standing in plain view with their swords drawn, not quite remembering how they had got there. They were so dizzy with horror and rage that neither knew which of them had acted first. It made no difference. The villagers froze, looking like schoolboys caught at mischief.

‘For God’s sake, cut him down, Lestin,’ said Eldol. Then he saw the two subordinates edge towards the weapons they had left on the ground.

‘Don’t move!’

They started back.

‘Are you out of your minds? Do these people really look like Saxons to you? They’re... they’re the *opposite* of Saxons!’ He pointed to their leader with his sword. ‘You. What’s your name?’

‘Dinabuc, son of Allectus.’ He sounded like he expected the name to mean something to them. ‘Look, my lad, I happen to be a very important man around—’

‘Shut your mouth.’

Justice seemed to dictate that at least one of these villagers should die. This Dinabuc, with his fat head and cold heart, was the obvious candidate. Eldol’s memory suddenly brought back the face of the man he had killed at Ambrosius’s fort. He remembered the shy warmth in his eyes as he shook his hand.

‘*Sigeferth is mín nama,*’ the thane had said, a short time before Eldol stabbed him to death. He had died right there in his seat, knocking food everywhere as he groped at the table, while Eldol stabbed him again and again. When the thane was dead, Eldol had made for Hengest. But hadn’t someone else got in the way? Now he seemed to remember a young Jute, armed with sword and shield, who had leapt into his path. He saw fear in the young Jute’s face when he drew closer, and after that... and after that there was only the black absence of memory, once again. Had he killed a second man?

Lestin was sawing at the rope with Vortigern’s sword, cursing its inadequacy to the task. At last he managed to cut through it. The Alemannic slave thudded into the dust. Dirt thrown up from the ditch collected on the dry, lolling tongue.

‘Too late,’ said Lestin.

Eldol stepped closer to Dinabuc, throwing him into his shadow.

‘Are you pleased with yourself? Is that justice well served?’

‘It was only a slave,’ said Dinabuc. ‘They’re foreigners. They could be dangerous.’

‘*I* could be dangerous! Suppose we string you up, eh? You and your friends here. How would you like that, eh?’

Dinabuc laughed, perhaps trying to sound nonchalant. He just sounded terrified.

‘The others will be back soon. They’ve got weapons. You’d better get out of here while you can.’

‘Oh yes?’

The point of Eldol’s sword now came to rest upon Dinabuc’s sternum, dimpling the tunic. He curled both his hands around the hilt.

‘The other two are alive, at least,’ said Lestin. ‘We could take them in the wagon and get them out of here.’

‘Who are you people?’ said Dinabuc. ‘What right have you got to threaten us? This is our land.’

‘Never mind who we are,’ said Eldol. ‘Unbuckle your sword belt. Drop it on the ground.’

Dinabuc did as he was told.

‘Now take your two little friends and get out of here. Leave your weapons. Quickly, before I change my mind.’

The three villagers bolted into the trees, and Eldol picked up the sword belt.

‘There, we’ve got one each now. How are we doing?’

‘As well as can be expected,’ said Lestin, who was trying to pull the monk out of the ditch. ‘We’ll be doing a lot better once we’ve left this bloody backwater a long way behind us.’

Eldol helped the boy to his feet and used his dagger to cut the cords around his wrists. The boy’s arms felt cold and rigid, and he was shivering.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ said Eldol. ‘We’ve got a wagon not far from here. Where were you headed?’

‘The Theodosian College,’ the boy whispered in an accent similar to the monk’s.

‘Where’s that?’

‘It is an ecclesiastical school,’ said the monk, rubbing his freed wrists while Lestin knelt down to untie the cords around his ankles. The wobble had gone from his voice. ‘Near a town called Bomium, some way southwest of here.’

Eldol spoke again to the boy.

‘So you’ve come all way from Gallia to be schooled? Your parents must be rich, eh?’

‘They were.’

The monk mercifully filled the silence that followed.

‘We are very grateful to you both, I cannot tell you how grateful. We simply could not reason with those men.’

‘Don’t mention it,’ said Eldol. ‘Where in Gallia have you come from exactly?’

‘From the Britannic colonies, in Armorica. There has been trouble there of late, and my master thought his young ward might be safer in the more temperate climes of Britannia. It seems he was mistaken. I did not expect to see citizens carrying weapons like that; it is still forbidden in the Empire, on pain of death.’

‘It is?’

‘Yes, for fear of revolts.’ Fully untied now, and the monk bowed deeply before Eldol. ‘I am Paulinus Calixus of the monastery at Corisopitum. The young master’s name is Ambris. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts.’

‘Come on,’ said Lestin, throwing the ropes back into the ditch. ‘We’ll get to know one another properly later. Let’s get back to the wagon before the rest of those yokels come looking for us.’

Back down the road, Vortigern had got out of the wagon to catch some fresh air. Now he saw the monk and the young boy who were now following behind his companions on their return. Eldol read the look on his face long before they reached the wagon, and before Vortigern could say anything he let loose a barrage of words.

‘We found them up ahead. It’s all right, they’re from Armorica. They were nearly murdered. Some locals were just about to hang them for being Saxons or Scoti. They didn’t seem to mind which. They already hanged their driver. Can we bring them along with us? They’re going the same way as—’

‘Slow down!’ said Vortigern. ‘Come here a moment.’ He took Eldol by the arm and led him around to the back of the wagon. ‘What is wrong with you? We are on the run, hunted by two armies—two different armies, Eldol—and you want to pick up *passengers*?’

‘But they were—’

‘Did either of you tell them anything? Your names, for instance, or where we’ve come from?’

‘No, my lord.’

‘You’re certain?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

Vortigern thought for a moment.

‘All right. You will need to stop calling me “my lord”, for a start. I’ve told you about that before. It might be safer to bring them along than to have them picked up by our enemies. Now, you will need to make sure you don’t slip up here, Eldol. The slightest foolishness or forgetfulness from you could doom us. Or rather doom your new friends, since we would have no choice but to kill them. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, my... yes.’

‘All right. Follow my lead.’ Vortigern went around to the front of the wagon again and gave the newcomers his best smile. ‘I am sorry about that, my friends. I had to speak to my son’—he gave Lestin a meaningful look—‘for a moment there. I hear you’ve had trouble with the locals.’

‘Yes,’ said the monk. ‘One might say that.’

‘I’m afraid it can be dangerous for travellers in this region. They are very suspicious of outsiders here. You’re both quite welcome to ride with us as far as Tamium, though. Is that on your way?’

The monk looked up and bobbed his head slightly, as if trying to remember something.

‘It is not on the itinerary that I memorised, at least not under that name. Is it on the way to Bomium?’

‘It is indeed. My name, by the way, is Lucius.’ Vortigern stepped forward and offered his hand. ‘I am a dog trader from Venta Belgarum. The plague has forced us from our home, and we hope to find shelter with an old friend of mine. I see you have already met *my two sons*.’ The meaningful look was repeated. ‘This one is Eldol, and this is Lestin.’

The monk shook Vortigern’s hand.

‘I am Paulinus Calixus of the monastery at Corisopitum. The young master’s name is Ambris. But I must ask, is it truly your wish that I call you Lucius? Would it not be unseemly for me to address you by your forename?’

‘Not at all. My family name is undistinguished, and I prefer not to be called by my cognomen, like a stranger, as is the fashion among my sons’ generation. Call me Lucius, my friend, I insist.’

Calixus bowed again, still holding his hand.

‘As you wish, my lord Lucius.’

‘And Ambris,’ said Vortigern, turning to the boy. ‘That’s a Britannic name, is it not?’

‘Sort of,’ said the boy, still in a whisper.

‘Do not let our way of speaking mislead you,’ said Calixus, ‘as it misled those men who would have murdered us. Though we are citizens of the Empire, we are just as much Britons as we are Romans.’

‘Really,’ said Lestin, ‘I’m sorry to keep butting in like this but it’s more than likely that those men still want to murder you. They’ll be back before long, and there won’t be just three of them this time. If you’d all like to get into the wagon, please.’

‘After you, Calixus,’ said Vortigern.

The monk climbed into the back of the wagon, and there was again a sudden chorus of

barking.

‘Don’t worry. They’ll get used to you.’

XIV

The dogs did indeed get used to Calixus, but Eldol did not. The monk was such an unrelentingly dreary man that it was a wonder that someone hadn't murdered him long ago. Every syllable he spoke was like a set of knuckles rapping on Eldol's forehead. His face had such a maddeningly sour expression that Eldol found himself daydreaming about punching the poor monk.

The boy, on the other hand, made Eldol's heart sink just to look at him. He only spoke when spoken to, with never a word more than was necessary, and always in that wretched whisper.

Vortigern did not seem at all bothered by the monk's company. On the contrary, he seemed gripped by everything he had to say. Much of the conversation was about wars and intrigues overseas. The only thing that piqued Eldol's interest was when the monk talked about the current crisis in the eastern half of the Empire. Over the last year, the eastern provinces had been laid waste by a barbarian king. He had defeated the Roman army in open battle and now looked set to march on Constantinopolis itself. The barbarian king's name was Attila.

In the afternoon the wagon drew within sight of its latest hoped-for destination. Tamium was more of a fortress than a town, with a tiny population made up of soldiers and their families. Its magistrate, Glivis, rarely attended meetings of the Consilium. The only time he had ever spoken at a meeting was when he had stood and loudly announced, in the middle of a discussion on the dwindling pottery industry in the southwest, that the use of heavy cavalry was 'the way forward'. When he was met with baffled silence he sat down, red-faced, never again to make a contribution. Vortigern had only spoken directly to him a handful of times. There was no reason to suppose he would be any more loyal than Iniris. That Vortigern was ready to throw himself on Glivis's mercy only showed how desperate he was.

The road led up to the town gates, but there was no way to get the wagon inside. The gateway was bricked up, leaving a gap in the bottom corner just wide enough for a person to enter on foot. A wheeled vehicle would never fit through. Lestin shouted something to this effect back to his passengers.

'Not quite the welcome I had hoped for,' said Vortigern. 'Come, Eldol. You and I will go on foot.'

The two of them got out and walked towards the gateway in miserable silence. They both knew it was hopeless. When they came within thirty feet of the gate, a spear appeared out of nowhere and stuck quivering in the ground in front of them. A sentry stood looking down at them from the rampart.

‘The next one won’t miss,’ he said. ‘Go on, get out of it!’

‘My good man,’ said Vortigern. ‘We are friends of my lord Glivis. We seek only shelter.’

‘Glivis has no friends, nor enemies. There’s only shelter here for them that serves Glivis. Now, do you see that?’ The sentry pointed down the length of the wall to a tower. Upon it, another two soldiers were training a ballista on Eldol and Vortigern. ‘When I give the signal, they shoot. Now get lost.’

‘But my good man...’ Vortigern’s voice cracked. ‘Perhaps if you told Glivis we are here to see him?’

‘Who are you?’

‘My name is Lucius.’

‘So’s mine. Half the men in here are called Lucius or Marcus. What’s your family name?’

‘I... I am Glivis’s friend.’

‘I’ll count to three, and then I’m giving the signal to shoot.’

‘But my good man—’

‘One.’

‘Oh, all right!’ Vortigern shouted. ‘We’re leaving. When Glivis hears of this, you can be sure—’

‘Two.’

Vortigern grabbed Eldol by the sleeve, and they marched back to the wagon. The other two passengers stood outside of it. They had heard everything.

‘What is the matter?’ said Calixus. ‘Could you not have simply told him who you are?’

Vortigern feigned indignation, not unconvincingly.

‘Why should I give that peasant my name? Twenty years ago a man of breeding would never have had to bandy words with a sentry. No, I would rather starve than suffer that.’

‘Never mind,’ said Lestin. ‘We can go off the road and drive around the fort. We’ve still got plenty of daylight left anyway.’

‘I think I understand,’ said Calixus. ‘You were quite right when you observed that people in these parts are suspicious of outsiders. To be turned away like that without an audience... needless to say, you are all welcome to shelter with us at the college. It cannot be far from here.’

It seemed absurd now that none of them had thought of asking. Vortigern accepted gratefully, and they all hurried back into the wagon.

‘What a day,’ said Eldol when they had set off. ‘To think just this morning we were in Port Abona. How many miles do you think we’ve covered?’

‘God only knows,’ said Vortigern. ‘I feel sorry for the horse. Still, thanks to our new friends here, it looks like we’ll each find a bed at the end of it. It was a stroke of luck running into you, Calixus.’

The monk bowed his head.

‘The Lord has surely had a hand in our meeting. My old teacher is the principal at the Theodosian College. He will be overjoyed to welcome you, not least because you have saved the lives of both his former pupil and his pupil-to-be.’

To get to the college, Lestin had to go off the road and take the wagon down a dirt track towards the coast. The heat abated as the sun made its descent. Soon the passengers in the back heard the whisper of the waves and the keening of the gulls. Then the wagon stopped.

‘Who are you?’ said a gruff voice that grew louder as the speaker approached. ‘State your business.’

Lestin answered, sounding nervous.

‘I’m a dog trader.’

‘We’ve no need for dogs here.’

‘No, it’s not that. I’ve got a passenger; some passengers, I should say. One of them has come to be enrolled at the college.’

‘Is that right? I’ll have to check your wagon. Get down from your seat, if you please, and don’t make any sudden movements.’ The speaker appeared at the back of the wagon, a strapping dour-faced man of about fifty. He wore a cowl and tonsure, just like Calixus, but apart from that he was unlike any monk they had seen. For one thing, he held a drawn sword in his hand. He grimaced as the stench from the dogs hit him, and took a step back.

‘Come out of there, if you please.’

They complied as quickly as their stiff joints would allow, and soon they were all standing at the side of the wagon with Lestin. The sun was settling down for the evening behind the wooded hills to their right. Ahead of them were some buildings, enclosed by a ditch and palisaded bank. Beyond that was a dark forest, and to the left they could see an indigo sliver of sea at the base of the sky. More monks with drawn swords were encircling them.

‘Now,’ the first monk continued, looking at Ambris, ‘I suppose you must be the new pupil we’ve been expecting.’

‘I must be,’ the boy whispered.

The monk sheathed his sword and waved to the others to do likewise.

‘Young sir, my name is Martinus Saturninus. Welcome to the Theodosian College.’

Calixus stepped forward and bowed to Saturninus. Eldol found himself silently mouthing the words along with him as he introduced himself.

‘I am Paulinus Calixus of the monastery at Corisopitum. The young master’s name is Ambris.’

‘I’m sorry for the rude welcome. We weren’t expecting you for another couple of days. Who are your friends?’

‘This is Lucius, a dog trader from Venta Belgarum, and these are his sons, Eldol and Lestin. They saved our lives. Some of the locals stole our carriage and murdered our driver just outside Isca.’

Saturninus scanned the faces of the three men, seeming to commit them to memory as he nodded a greeting to each of them.

‘Murdered your driver?’ he said eventually. ‘Why in God’s name did they do that?’

‘They mistook us for Saxons,’ said Calixus. ‘They were about to hang us when, God be praised, these good men came to our rescue. I took the liberty of offering them shelter at the college. I hope this was not too presumptuous of me.’

‘Of course not. You’re all welcome to stay here as long as you like.’

‘My dogs,’ Lestin blurted out. ‘My dogs are sick and hungry, sir. I haven’t been able to feed them since I left Venta Belgarum.’

‘They’ll be taken care of. Firstly, though, I’ll have to take your swords. They’re not allowed inside the college.’

Eldol and Lestin both glanced at Vortigern, who was already unbuckling his sword belt, and they followed suit.

‘As you wish, Saturninus,’ said the old man as he handed over his weapon. ‘I’ve no doubt we will be quite safe in your company even without our swords. But I must say, I am puzzled. Are you training priests here, or soldiers?’

‘Both, in a way. You’ve seen yourself how dangerous it can be around here. Come, I’ll show you to your quarters and have the brothers fix up something to eat for you. In the morning you’ll be given the tour of the place, and we’ll be able to give you a better idea of what we do here.’

The monks led them into the grounds of the college itself, which was made up of a loose scattering of wooden halls and stone chapels. Two of the monks took Lestin’s wagon away to the stables. In the midst of the cowed figures moving between the various buildings they saw a young woman with loose red hair. Seeing Saturninus, she waved and came towards the group.

‘What is this?’ said Calixus through his teeth. ‘Why is there a... a *girl* here, brother?’

‘Oh, that’s just Lupait,’ said Saturninus. ‘The principal’s family live in a villa a little way north of here. She helps out around the college.’

‘Not... surely she does not preach the Gospel here?’

‘No, no, nothing like that. She helps out now and then in the kitchens and the guest dormitories, mostly.’

‘Mostly?’

‘Yes, when we have visitors.’

Lupait was close now, and she gave the group a cheery smile.

‘How do you do, sirs?’

Calixus made an outraged noise in the back of his throat.

‘Lupait, my child,’ said Saturninus, ‘these men have travelled a long way, and I’m sure they’re very hungry. Do you think you could show them to the dormitories and—’

‘Supper, and then bed?’

‘Yes. I’ll be giving them a tour of the college early in the morning, so—’

‘Oh, I won’t keep them awake too long. Well then, sirs, if you’ll follow me this way...’

The party moved to follow the girl, and Saturninus caught Calixus by the sleeve of his habit.

‘Not you, brother. If you’re not too tired, I’d just like to discuss the matter of the young master’s enrolment. It won’t take long.’

‘Very well. Ambris, wait a moment.’

The boy stopped and looked back at them.

‘Oh, let him get to his supper and bed, brother,’ said Saturninus. ‘Look at him, the poor lad’s exhausted.’

Calixus closed his eyes and let out a long breath through his nose.

‘Never mind, Ambris. Go on.’ He watched the boy disappear after the rest of the group, and not quite under his breath he added, ‘*I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters...*’

‘It’s not like that, brother,’ said Saturninus. ‘She’s just a country girl, from Arecluta.’

‘She is one of the principal’s family?’

‘She is. Come on, let’s walk.’

Saturninus led Calixus to another gateway in the far side of the palisade, and they came out onto some fields. It was starting to get dark now. Clouds of gnats and the occasional lone moth harassed them as they walked, and somewhere behind them a stubborn cockerel was noisily refusing to roost.

‘Ambris seems a quiet boy,’ said Saturninus, ‘and small for his age. This is a good school, but even here there are a few bullies among the pupils. Do you think he’ll settle in?’

‘I have no doubt of it,’ said Calixus. ‘He has had a nasty shock, that is all. At the monastery he was a most popular student. He has some natural quality that draws others to him. You will see.’

‘I’m glad to hear it. And I’m glad to have you both here, finally. I’ve been in touch with your master in Armorica for some months now, and he’s told me a little bit about young Ambris.’

‘You yourself?’

‘Yes. The principal of the college isn’t able to attend to these matters. I suppose you could say I’ve been running the place for him lately.’

‘I see. How is old Potitus?’

Saturninus stopped.

‘I’m sorry, you didn’t know... I’m afraid Potitus went to the Lord some months ago. The principalship was passed on along with his estate to his heir.’

‘I was looking forward to seeing him,’ Calixus sighed. ‘But I realise he must have been very old. Then his son is now...?’

‘No, no. Good heavens, haven’t you heard?’

‘Heard what?’

‘Potitus’s son and his wife were killed in a raid a couple of years ago, and... well, now Potitus’s grandson is the principal of the college.’

Calixus nodded, but he was only half listening. His thoughts were still on the girl. Her laugh still rang in his ears. They walked on.

‘Tell me about Armorica,’ said Saturninus. ‘I understand you and Ambris were both born in Britannia, and moved away some time ago.’

‘Ten years ago. I brought him with me when his parents were killed. Personally, I was of the opinion that it was too soon to bring him back, but my master feared for his safety in Armorica. There is unrest among the lower classes. Ambris might have become a target, coming as he does from an old and wealthy family. There have already been a few murders. Isolated incidents so far, but I fear it will get worse.’

Just then they saw a silhouette staggering drunkenly across the field towards them. The figure fell to his knees, and then began to pick himself up with some difficulty.

‘Oh, not again,’ Saturninus muttered. ‘Excuse me, brother.’

‘Who is that?’ said Calixus, but the question went unanswered as his companion hurried to help the drunkard. The figure getting to his feet, covered in mud, was a boy no older than sixteen.

‘You can’t keep doing this,’ said Saturninus once the boy was standing more or less upright. ‘You’ll bankrupt us. I bet we’d have got five or six cows for what you’ve drunk tonight.’

‘Havvun hadda much,’ said the drunken boy. ‘Onnersley, S’ninus.’

‘Yes, you have. You’ll kill yourself at this rate.’

The boy’s face darkened with the sudden rage of the inebriate. He threw a punch at Saturninus that missed him by a foot and a half. Saturninus, unruffled, seized him by the wrists.

‘That’s enough.’

‘You killyussel... bassad...’

‘That’s enough, Succatus! You’re making a fool of yourself.’

The rage turned into sorrow with startling quickness, and the boy looked as if he were about to cry. Channelling all of his befuddled will into the muscles that worked his mouth, he made an effort to speak properly.

‘I’m sorry, Sat... Saturninus. I’ll go and... whozis?’

‘This is Calixus. Listen, the dormitories are still open. Why don’t you go and sleep it off? Can you get there by yourself?’

‘Of course... donbesilly...’ The boy nodded to Calixus as he tottered off. ‘G’night.’

Calixus waited until the boy was out of earshot.

‘Good lord, Saturninus, is this how the students behave here? Why do you not punish that boy?’

‘I’d like to, believe me. That boy, brother, is the Reverend Lord Magonius Succatus. He’s the new principal of the college.’

‘*He*? He is the principal? And an ordained priest? It cannot be true!’

‘I’m afraid it is, brother. Needless to say, he’s got nothing to do with the actual running of the place. His sisters are more sensible than he is, but of course they can’t take on the work he should be doing. More’s the pity. Well, I’ve taken my vows, anyway, so much of the principal’s work falls to me. My experience as a soldier comes in handy with organising the defences, but a lot more work needs to be done on that front. The college is in a vulnerable spot.’

‘You were a soldier?’

Now it seemed obvious. Calixus knew many monks who had once been soldiers, and they were all like Saturninus in one way or another. It was becoming more common. Modern life was often too complicated for men who had enlisted at fourteen and retired at forty.

‘Yes. I served under Ambrosius, God rest him, in the war ten years ago. Speaking of which... brother, I need to speak to you about something, and now that the young master is out of the way...’

‘Yes?’

‘I’m under the impression you don’t know much about the old man who came in here with you.’

‘No indeed. My guess is that he is a fugitive of some kind.’

‘Go on.’

‘He says he is a dog breeder, and that his first name is Lucius. We stopped at a fortress where he had hoped to find shelter, but he refused to identify himself to the sentries and was turned away. It was most unusual. The men travelling with him call themselves his sons, yet I never saw two men who looked less alike.’

‘And of course all three speak with different accents.’

‘Indeed. They said that they were fleeing the plague in Venta Belgarum. Why could they not have sought shelter in one of the other towns between Venta Belgarum and here? They did save our lives, however, so I have tried not to dwell on my suspicions.’

Saturninus nodded.

‘Well, brother, it’s at least true that the old man’s name is Lucius. He is Lucius Vitalinus Vortigernus, the head of the Consilium.’

Calixus tittered uncertainly, and then covered his mouth.

‘It cannot be!’

‘I recognised him as soon as he got out of that wagon. He looks just the same as he did ten years ago, when I saw him fleeing the battlefield with his personal guard. And you guessed right; he’s a wanted man. I need to find some excuse to keep him here while I send word to Venta Silurum. Will you help me?’

Calixus hesitated.

‘I will not stand in your way,’ he said finally. ‘But I will not tell the boy, brother. It would not be right to involve him. I will help as much as I can, but I must ask that we be both excused from the scene of the arrest.’

‘As you wish, brother.’

‘Yes...’ Calixus thought for a moment. ‘You will not persuade him to stay, I think, unless he has no means of leaving. Perhaps you might find some way to deprive them of their wagon.’

XV

Pascent now had a third name to add to his list of slain elder brothers.

This newest one was not related to him by blood, and Pascent had only known him for two days. After drinking from the sacred horn and thereby joining Cuthwulf's family, Pascent was taken into a dark room filled with a sweetly putrid stench. There he was introduced to the sweating, shivering creature who lay on the bed within. This was Trygils, Cuthwulf's son. As his father's heir and second in command, he had led the Middle Saxon contingent in the attack at Ambrosius's fort, and he had paid dearly for it. Trygils was borne back from the fighting barely alive, lashed face-up and feet-first to the back of a horse. He returned unconscious to his father's home on the same day Pascent was abducted, with his head bouncing on the horse's croup and his hands flapping madly around the hocks.

'Trygils,' Cuthwulf said softly in the dark room. 'This is your new brother, Pascent.'

The dying creature in the shadows said nothing. There seemed to be nothing left of him but his staring eyes and his long, sweat-drenched hair. Pascent found it hard to guess his age, but it did not seem to matter much. He was as old now as he would ever be.

'Pascent, say hello to Trygils.'

'Hello, Trygils. I hope you get better soon.'

Even now the men who had brought Trygils home were still being bombarded with questions. From the snatches of conversation that Pascent heard, he managed to piece together something of what had happened.

One of the consiliars (or 'elders of the *waelisc*', as the Saxons called them) had got hold of a knife in the confusion and had killed several men. No one knew who he was, but the survivors insisted he was 'twice the height of a normal man, with a face like a devil'. This giant had managed to rescue Pascent's father from the carnage and slip away with him. After that, some infighting had apparently broken out between the Saxons and the Jutes. It must have been serious, because the returning Saxons were very upset that Hengest had escaped. At present it was uncertain whether Trygils had received his wound from a Jute or from the gigantic Briton.

No one bothered to tell Pascent why, but the next morning they all set out for the west. Trygils's sickbed was exchanged for a sickhorse, and he left Cuthwulf's home the same way he had arrived. Now, as they set up camp for the night in one of the vast forests that seemed to stretch right across the centre of the country, they found that Trygils had finally given up the ghost. His body was already cold when they untied him and laid him on the ground.

'Don't look, Pascent,' said Eoppa, stepping into the line of sight between the boy and Trygils's corpse. Pascent humoured him and looked away. When they told him that his son

was now finally dead, Cuthwulf launched into a breathless stream of curses and ran into his tent. His women followed him inside to console him.

‘He seems surprised,’ said Pascent. ‘Didn’t he know Trygils was dying?’

‘He must have,’ said Eoppa vaguely. ‘Perhaps he was putting a brave face on things, or perhaps it hadn’t quite sunk in. Then again...’ The priest’s face fell. ‘Oh... oh dear.’

‘What’s the matter?’

Eoppa covered his mouth with both his hands. He looked very frightened.

‘I think there’s been a terrible misunderstanding.’

Then Cuthwulf came charging out of the tent and punched Eoppa squarely in the face. The priest dropped to the ground.

‘Liar! My son is dead! You promised us eternal life!’

‘That wasn’t quite what I meant, my king,’ said Eoppa, clutching his bleeding nose. ‘The life eternal is a life after death.’

‘Well then? When will my boy awaken?’

Eoppa began to get up, but then decided against it and stayed where he was.

‘Forgive me, my king. I must have been unclear in my explanation. Trygils is gone from our world, but he’ll reawaken in a better place. He will live in heaven with the Lord.’

‘That is no good to me. How will he succeed to my kingdom if he is in heaven? You must bring him back!’

‘Bring him back?’ There was an unwise note of incredulity in Eoppa’s voice, and it was punished immediately by a barrage of kicks to the ribs, legs and back. Pascent looked on, knowing he would be killed if he tried to intervene. Eoppa lay motionless, in too much pain even to writhe.

‘You listen to me,’ said Cuthwulf hoarsely. ‘You must know that I am not a man to be turned away from what is promised to me. You must bring him back.’

Eoppa was winded, and his reply came in short bursts.

‘Cannot... ’m sorry... n’t have the power... do that.’ Cuthwulf drew his knife, and Eoppa found his breath. ‘No, not that! You mustn’t kill me, I’m a priest!’

Cuthwulf paused, thwarted. Then, with surprising speed for such a fat man, he grabbed the warrior nearest to him and drove the knife into his heart. The man sank to his knees and died, dutifully silent.

‘I am serious about what I say,’ said Cuthwulf. He sounded a little calmer already. ‘You told us the story about the Lord Jesus bringing the man back from the dead. That is what must be done. We go to see your master the bishop. He will bring my son back to life. If he does not do what I ask then I will kill you, Eoppa. Do you understand?’

‘Yes. Perfectly, my king.’

Cuthwulf abruptly broke into good humour.

‘You are a good and clever boy, Eoppa, and I am very glad that you are my hearth-companion. One day you will be a very famous wise man if you are wise enough to do what I tell you.’ Turning around, Cuthwulf almost tripped over the man he had just murdered. ‘Ecgfrid is dead!’ he shouted to the other warriors. ‘Don’t just stand there! Ecgfrid is dead. Collect firewood so we can send him to the Lord Jesus. And carry my son to his tent. He will not be able to walk there himself while he is still dead.’

Now that it seemed safer to do so, Pascent knelt down beside Eoppa.

‘Are you all right?’

‘Yes,’ said Eoppa, sitting up. ‘He’s done worse to me before.’

‘What was all that about a bishop?’

‘It’s better I don’t tell you. At least for now.’

‘Can you at least tell me where we’re going?’

‘To Venta Silurum. It’s a town, west of the Sabren.’

‘I know Venta Silurum. Why are we going there?’

Eoppa shook his head.

‘Don’t ask me, Pascent, not yet. Whatever happens, wherever we are going, the only important thing—’

‘Is to stay alive,’ Pascent finished. ‘I know, Eoppa. But will this bishop really be able to bring Trygils back to life?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t think so.’

‘So what will you do?’

The priest closed his eyes and lay back down on the grass.

‘It’ll take another day for us to get there, maybe two. I’ll probably live that long at least.’

XVI

While his downfall was being plotted in the fields outside the college grounds, Vortigern settled down to supper with Eldol, Lestin and Ambris in the refectory. The place was filled with rows of tables, all vacant apart from their own. Lupait excused herself after helping serve up the meal, which consisted of a bowl of some lumpy beige substance for each of them.

‘What is this?’ said Vortigern, lifting a spoonful of it.

‘Porridge,’ said Lestin with his mouth full. ‘It’s good.’

Eldol had already finished. Now he was eyeing Vortigern’s and Ambris’s bowls. To his disappointment, they both began to eat.

‘So,’ said Vortigern, ‘how do you like your new school so far, Ambris?’

‘It’s fine,’ the boy whispered.

‘You’re very lucky, you know. This is supposed to be the best school in the country. I hear many of the consiliars in Londinium send their sons to be schooled here.’

The boy shrugged, steadfastly avoiding the old man’s eye.

‘It’s not what I expected,’ said Eldol. ‘I thought it would be all built out of stone. I suppose they must be quite new buildings.’

‘The college itself is fairly old,’ said Vortigern. ‘It certainly existed when I was a young man, but I think it was smaller then. They must have built these halls later on.’

‘It’s in a bad location,’ said Lestin. ‘Half of them out here still worship trees and rocks.’

Lupait came back into the refectory, and both Vortigern and Lestin straightened up in their seats. Eldol was embarrassed by the way they simpered at her when she approached, not least because both men were recent widowers. But then he was also uncomfortably conscious of his own desire for the girl. He averted his eyes, blushing again.

A handful of girls in Glevum, invariably of low social status and seduced only by his wealth, had braved the ordeal of his bed from time to time, but things were different here. Here he was nobody. Looking down at the big hairy paws that rested on the table in front of him, he recalled the sight of the reflection he occasionally chanced upon. Was there a woman alive who could love the sunken eyes, the heavy brow or the jaw he had seen there? Could any woman really want to wake up to the daily litany of snoring, farting and groaning from the back pain that troubled him every morning?

‘All done, sirs?’ said Lupait.

‘That was delicious, my lovely,’ said Lestin as the girl took his empty bowl.

‘And very filling, my dear,’ said Vortigern.

The boy spoke above a murmur for the first time and revealed the uncertain baritone of a

newly-broken voice.

‘Thank you, my lady. I wonder if I might be shown to a bed..’

‘Of course, Master Ambris.’

The boy stood and gave the others at the table a single curt nod to share between them.

‘Goodnight.’

‘Goodnight, Ambris,’ said the three men in near unison, and they watched him follow the girl out of the hall.

‘He’s brightened up a bit at last,’ said Lestin. ‘Poor little blighter. He must have been scared out of his wits this afternoon.’

‘How old is he, do you think?’ said Eldol.

‘About fourteen, I suppose, give or take a year,’ said Lestin. ‘Too old to be starting at a new school, anyway. That’s the age a boy should be beginning his trade, or joining the army.’

‘I wouldn’t know,’ said Eldol. ‘I was schooled at home.’

‘By your father?’

‘No, by a priest. My father paid for him to come to our home and tutor my brother and me. It must have cost a fortune, and now I don’t remember a single thing he taught me. I never really got the hang of reading and writing.’

‘So... so you can’t...’ Lestin stopped, and then went on half involuntarily. ‘So you can’t read? Is that not a bit of an obstacle, with you being a magistrate?’

‘Well, I was never meant to be a magistrate, really. The tribunes just offered me the job after my father died. “Offered” isn’t the right word, exactly. They just said, “You’re the new magistrate, Eldol. Sorry about your father. Now get out of bed.”’

‘So what did you want to be?’

‘A... well... a nobleman, I suppose.’

‘A nobleman?’

‘Well, yes. My brother had already gone into the Church, and my father forbade both of us from joining the army, so I thought I would end up just... just being a nobleman.’

‘But that isn’t a job.’

‘No, I suppose it isn’t. What about you, Lestin? Where did you go to school?’

‘I didn’t. My mother taught me to read Latin, the basics at least. They couldn’t afford to send me to a school or anything like that. I’m glad, though. I don’t think I’d have liked being shut up in a place like this. It’s not natural.’

Vortigern shifted in his seat and yawned.

‘Excuse me. Good lord, I do believe I’ve become so used to that wagon that I start to fall asleep no matter where I am! I agree with you, though, Lestin. I certainly wouldn’t send my son to a place like this. Still, for somewhere to spend a night to rest and recuperate, we could do a lot worse. I’m hoping the monks will give us fresh supplies for the journey ahead. It will be a long one.’

‘Oh yes?’ said Lestin. ‘It sounds like you’ve got a plan, my lord.’

‘A destination, at least. Now, if I have my bearings correctly, I should say that it would take us about two days to reach Venedotia from here.’

‘Venedotia?’ said Eldol. ‘But why would you want to go there, my lord?’

‘Because we are sure to find shelter there. Cunedag Creiserit happens to be my oldest and staunchest ally.’

As ignorant as Eldol generally was of politics and history, he knew the name of Cunedag. Lestin did too. He lowered his eyes.

‘Will... *he* help us?’

‘Of course,’ said Vortigern, cheerfully ignoring their misgivings. ‘Do you know the way there, Lestin?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

Vortigern watched the downcast faces of his companions for a moment, leaning back in his seat, and laughed.

‘It will be fine, I promise you. I know there are a lot of stories told about Cunedag, but the same is true of any firm ruler.’

When Lupait returned she showed them to a small guest dormitory, where the three of them got ready for bed. In the morning they were woken up by a spotty young monk who told them they must attend the morning service before breakfast. Rubbing the sleep from their eyes, they were marched through the drizzle to one of the chapels, where they sat in the damp and semi-darkness through an hour of halting, mispronounced Latin. Eldol had to be nudged awake more than once.

Breakfast was identical to the previous night’s supper except for the presence of a few dozen boys, who ate in preternatural silence. Calixus and Ambris were nowhere to be seen, but the other three had decided it was time they should be leaving. There was only so much porridge and prayer one could take.

Eventually they found Saturninus near the stables. They told him that while they were very grateful for the hospitality he had shown them, they wanted to be on their way as soon as possible.

‘Ah...’ he said with an apologetic show of teeth. ‘I’m afraid there’s a problem. It looks like one of the boys has played a very stupid prank, and, well... I’d better show you.’

He motioned for them to follow him into the stables, and led them to the far end of the aisle between the stalls. The empty cages were neatly arranged in a row against the wall, the dogs having been taken to convalesce in the kennels. Lestin’s horse was tethered in one of the stalls, looking sleek and well-rested. The wagon, however, was missing its two rear wheels and was tipped back at a crazy angle.

‘We haven’t found the wheels yet,’ Saturninus continued, ‘but when we do we’ll reattach them right away. I promise you, whichever of the boys is responsible for this will be thrashed senseless, maybe even expelled from the college.’

‘I don’t believe this,’ said Lestin. ‘So we’re stuck here?’

‘Thrashing or expelling your students will not get us on our way any quicker,’ said Vortigern. ‘Could you not lend us another wagon? Perhaps some horses?’

‘I’m afraid we don’t have a wagon, and we couldn’t possibly spare any horses. They’re far too valuable. You’re welcome to stay here, of course. In fact, the principal has invited you to dine at his house tonight.’

Vortigern gave Saturninus a knowing look.

‘How kind,’ he said eventually. ‘Thank you, Saturninus. We would be delighted to dine with the principal tonight. Please pass on my thanks for the invitation.’

‘Of course.’ Saturninus took Vortigern by the arm. It was a friendly gesture, but he had the air of a guard arresting a thief. ‘In the meantime, I believe I promised you a proper tour of

the college. Please come with me.'

XVII

In his host's dining hall in Venta Silurum, Bishop Germanus battled with the luncheon he had been given, sawing and chipping at the overcooked meat with the patience of a sculptor.

The greyish beef came away in flakes, which he then lifted into his mouth and chewed with saintly tact. The others around the table were careful not to overtake him in his progress. Surely he would judge this to be a typically egregious example of local cuisine. But the great man expressed no dissatisfaction. He was full of compliments for the people at the table. Every word of praise from Bishop Germanus was like a kiss from a new lover, and they melted at every kindness he showed them.

They paid little attention to the bishop's companion, Severus, a mere priest. He took no offence. He too was overawed by the bishop. Like them, he watched the bishop as he chewed his food, marvelling at the great wrinkled dome of his forehead, the fastidious cut of his beard and the habit of rough brown cloth he wore when not addressing the masses. Severus had been hearing about Bishop Germanus his whole life. But the bishop was a man of action, and he had no writings of his own. He was here to make history. It was Severus's job to witness and record it.

For a while now Severus had been collecting information on the bishop from wherever he could. The story he had unravelled was a strange one. To look at the man of God now, one would never guess that he had once been a man of sin. Severus had not yet worked up the courage to ask him about his past. Surely he would not be angry with him if he brought it up? He was such a calm man. How patient he was now with their host, this creature who had brought his child-bride to the table. 'King Iniris' was now talking in execrable Latin about what lay ahead.

'It's all a question of dealing with one enemy at a time,' he said. 'If Vortigern is still alive, he will be trying to hide from us. His forces in Londinium are too disorganised to move against us without him. So it's simply a matter of waiting until he shows himself. Hengest is a different story. He won't shrink from attacking us if he feels threatened, and if he does it'll be without warning. It's best he doesn't know we plan to move against him until we're ready to do so. In the meantime, there's the Scoti to deal with.'

At this the visitors from the nearby towns bleated with the exaggerated resolve that was usual at meetings of the Consilium, and they thumped their fists on the tabletop to emphasise the point. The matter was close to their hearts.

'Now,' Iniris continued, 'our problem is one of numbers. We've the loyalty of practically every consiliar who wasn't killed at Ambrosius's fort the other day, but they can only bring us the few soldiers they have in their garrisons. Add that to the new recruits we have here,

and we still don't have enough men.'

'There's my horsemen,' said Glivis of Tamium, a big blond boor who always sounded like he had his mouth full when he spoke. He had no idea, of course, that Vortigern had tried to hand himself in to his men the day before. 'They can't get up the hill to Benli's fort without getting picked off by his archers, but maybe we can draw him out into the open.'

'Perhaps we could resolve the problem without bloodshed,' said Anblaud, the magistrate for Ariconium, who had said little until now. 'After all, we're united against the Scoti. If we were to show him that we take the situation seriously, then maybe Benli would back down.'

Glivis snorted.

'I don't know what we're waiting for. We should have driven that dirty cow-chaser back over the sea long ago, along with the rest of his race. We need to put an end to him now.'

Bishop Germanus cleared his throat very quietly. The notables at the table straightened up and gave him their full attention.

'More men will come,' he said. 'Don't worry about numbers. In any case, I have already taken steps against Benli. The matter is settled.'

'The matter is settled?' Iniris echoed. 'Do you mean... well, what do you mean, Lord Father?'

Bishop Germanus reached across the table to pat Iniris's hand.

'Don't worry, my dear fellow. The pieces are already in place. Really, all this would be better discussed when the time approaches. Why don't we enjoy our meal for now?'

The hint of reproach was not lost on them. An awkward silence settled, broken only by the scrape of a chair here and the clink of a knife there. Iniris's wife was unmoved. She was busy making a picture of a house with the uneaten components of her meal, swinging her short legs back and forth in the space between her seat and the floor. Iniris himself sat hunched over his empty plate until a guard came in behind him and whispered in his ear.

'Sorry to interrupt, my lord. There's someone to see you.'

'Who is it?'

'A monk. Says he's got something important to tell you. He won't speak to anyone else.'

'I'm sorry about this, Lord Father,' said Iniris. 'I'd better see what it is.'

'Not at all.'

Iniris went out of the room with the guard. Bishop Germanus spoke again.

'Well, I think a stroll around the town would help this delightful meal to settle. Will you join me, my friend?'

Severus saw that the bishop was looking at him.

'Yes, of course, Lord Father.'

Moments later, he was walking through the streets of Venta Silurum with his hero, alone with him virtually for the first time since their arrival in Britannia. Severus found he had nothing to say. The bishop seemed to pick up on how nervous he was. He led him to the shaded side of the street and broke the silence.

'So, then, young man... I have hardly had a chance to speak to you properly with all this work that keeps cropping up. How is your writing coming along?'

Severus took a moment to find his tongue.

'Oh, er... it's still in its early stages, Lord Father. It's not much more than a few notes at the moment. Observations, mostly.'

‘Observations? On me, or on the journey?’

Severus faltered, and the bishop laughed.

‘Don’t worry, I’ve no wish to pry into your work. I’m sure it will be a masterpiece. Bishop Lupus recommended you personally, and I have perfect faith in his judgement.’

‘Thank you, Lord Father.’

‘No; thank *you*, Severus, for coming with me. Tell me, what are your impressions of this strange island?’

Severus fiddled with his knuckles and fingernails.

‘Well... I must admit, it is not how I pictured it. Bishop Lupus told me about when he came with you the last time you were here. He said Britannia was prosperous and civilised. He said there was a strong government, and... well, it seems to me there’s no government at all. The Britons are like us in some ways, but at the same time they are so... I don’t know.’

They were on the main street now. It was so unlike his hometown of Treverorum, where the works of less squalid centuries still stood proudly for all to see. This place, with its squat buildings and muddy streets, looked like a half-deserted army camp. From what he had seen so far it, was about as good as Britannic towns got.

‘That was a long time ago,’ said the bishop. ‘The Britons have become isolated, and they’ve forgotten the old ways. Many have no wish to return to direct Roman rule. I am even told that one of the brothers at the Theodosian College has designed a new alphabet for the writing of the Britannic language, though they have no literature of their own.’

‘Couldn’t they write their language using Roman letters?’

‘If I were to ask you, Severus, to write down the sound a man makes when he clears his throat, how would you do it?’

‘I... I don’t think I could.’

‘No. The Britons were colonised, but never truly civilised. One must not mistake one for the other. We have a lot of work to do, Severus, and we don’t have much to work with.’

‘But we won’t have to stay here long, will we?’

‘Heavens, no. I have things to attend to in Armorica, with that butcher Aetius threatening to mobilise against the rebels. No, we need to help these Britons to a position of strength. After that they must learn to help themselves.’

‘Lord Father!’ shouted a voice from behind them. They turned to see Iniris bouncing and puffing towards them in a crude approximation of a sprint. He was out of breath by the time he reached them.

‘What is the matter, my friend?’ said the bishop.

‘It’s Vortigern,’ Iniris panted, bending forward to rest with his palms on his thighs. ‘We have him, Lord Father. He’s at the Theodosian College right now. They’re going to hold him there until you arrive.’

‘The Theodosian College?’ said Severus. ‘Of all places!’

Bishop Germanus touched his hands together, and his easy warmth was buried again under the gravitas of a living saint.

‘The Lord is with us... and as I have witnessed before, he is fond of a joke. Quickly, Iniris. I need two hundred of your best soldiers.’

‘Two hundred?’

Iniris’s breathlessness gave him an exaggerated look of surprise. It was comical, but the

bishop did not smile.

‘More will come, Iniris. Gather the men at once.’

XVIII

Saturninus had never had a moment of glory before. He had been within striking distance a couple of times, he thought, but something had always got in the way. Perhaps it was fate.

He came from a long line of soldiers who had all managed to die in their beds at a venerable old age. Saturninus's father had risen to a position of some small esteem, and he had been satisfied with his lot. The young Saturninus had wanted something else. History had not allowed him an heroic death so far. It was always a painting or a sculpture of his death scene that he imagined, rather than the actual event. He saw a representation of himself falling to one knee beside his slain horse, his arm pulled back to throw one last spear, his mouth frozen open in a final unvoiced battle-cry to echo through the centuries.

But when war came, he learned that real combat was not like that. He watched the front lines shuffle towards each other with self-doubt in every step, as though they were about to ask one another to dance. Moments later their bodies were pierced and ripped open by the spears of other terrified young men. There were no heroics; only bloody degradation and open-eyed death. Honour belonged only to the victorious general Ambrosius.

In that last battle, Saturninus had watched Vortigern flee the field with the remainder of his forces. 'There goes my last chance,' he had said to himself. Some victory, without so much as a scratch to show for it. The honour belonged only to the general Ambrosius.

But then a few days later, the news came that Ambrosius had been killed. Vortigern's faction took control of the Consilium, and Saturninus's unit was disbanded. He ran, despairingly, into the arms of the Church.

But now it looked like Saturninus had been granted one last chance. Everything would have to be perfect. He would turn to Vortigern and smile his iciest smile as he unmasked him over dinner. Perhaps Vortigern would break down and beg for forgiveness. Perhaps he would be defiant. Either way the end result would be the same, and Bishop Germanus would surely be impressed when he arrived. He might have further need of such a man as Saturninus after the tyrant was tried and executed. He might even want to take Saturninus back with him to Gallia. Gallia! Oh yes, it would have to be done with style. It would have to be perfect.

He had enlisted two of the slaves from the workshop to stand guard at the exits from the dining room. They would look suitably intimidating, kitted out in the sword belts confiscated from Eldol and Lestin. Saturninus wore Vortigern's own sword belt under his habit, and it gave him a secret thrill every time he felt the scabbard move against his leg.

The look on Vortigern's face that morning... He knew perfectly well that Saturninus had removed the wheels from the wagon himself. How his mind must be racing now to form a plan. And those two roughnecks posing as Vortigern's sons—the ambling giant and the

wagon driver with bruises all over his face—seemed to have caught something of his mood. They must not get a chance to confer unsupervised with one another. For this reason, it was still only mid-afternoon when Saturninus hurried the guests across the meadow to the principal's villa, with the promise that dinner would soon be ready.

The villa was a sprawling but tasteful estate that sat well in the surrounding countryside. The walls were of simple stone and plaster, the roofs thatched rather than tiled. But it was not a quiet place, and crews of slaves were hard at work with one thing and another in the courtyard. On the way in, Saturninus almost bumped into Tigrid, the elder of the principal's sisters. She was taller and thinner than Lupait, and far less welcoming.

'There you are,' she said, stiffening. 'Saturninus, was it you who ordered the kitchen staff to keep the roast for supper and to cook the pork?'

'It was I, my lady. We've guests for dinner, you see. They've been travelling, and I didn't want them to eat too late.'

Tigrid flashed a cold smile at the guests, whom she seemed to have only just noticed, and turned back to Saturninus.

'You haven't seen the state of the hall yet, have you?'

'No, my lady. Is it in a mess?'

'My brother decided to *redecorate* again this morning. I've already told the slaves to start cleaning up the place.'

'Very good, my lady. Will you be joining us for dinner?'

'Yes, shortly. I'd better go and fetch Succatus from his fishing.'

'Oh no... no, there's no need, really.'

Tigrid pushed past Saturninus, gently but very definitely, and stepped out into the courtyard.

'It'll be worse if he doesn't come,' she said. 'You know how he behaves when he feels like he's been left out of something. I'll be back soon.'

It only now dawned on Saturninus just how bad it would be if Bishop Germanus met the young principal, especially if he was in his cups. How had he not thought of that before?

He took the guests into the hall, where some slave women were busy scrubbing the walls. They still had the greater part of their work ahead of them. The murals on each of the four walls depicted scenes from the life of Christ. Not content with the work as it stood, the young principal had made certain anatomical changes to almost every figure depicted on the murals. The morning's additions revealed him to be an inexperienced draughtsman with a dirty mind and a poor eye for scale.

Saturninus gave a choked cry. The slave women stopped working and looked at him.

'Get to work!' he shouted. 'All of those... things need to be cleaned off the wall within the hour! You two—' He was speaking now to the workshop slaves, who stood sniggering in the other doorway. 'Help the women. Those drawings need to come off within the hour.'

'But you said you wanted us to—'

'Within the hour!'

Saturninus showed the guests to their seats at the table, and sat down. He was close to tears.

'I'm sorry about this,' he said, forgetting for the moment who these men were. 'I didn't know this had happened. The principal is... sixteen.'

‘Not at all, not at all,’ said Vortigern, bewildered. ‘Quite understandable.’

‘Sixteen?’ said Lestin.

The door opened again, and Tigrid came in with Succatus. The boy looked sullen and mistrustful as the guests rose from their seats to greet him.

‘Succatus,’ said Saturninus, ‘may I present our guests, Lucius, Eldol and Lestin, from Venta Belgarum. Gentlemen, may I present the Reverend Lord Magonius Succatus, and his sister, Tigrid.’

‘Are you here to buy cattle?’ said the boy, easing himself into the seat at the head of the table.

‘No,’ said Vortigern. ‘We’re dog breeders, my lord.’

‘We’ve no need for dogs here.’

‘Behave yourself,’ said Tigrid, sitting down to her brother’s left.

‘These men brought our newest pupil to us’ said Saturninus. ‘Young Ambris, who came yesterday.’

‘Who? What’s his family name?’

‘He’s an orphan.’

‘What about you, old fellow?’ said Succatus to Vortigern. ‘What’s your family name? Are you anyone I might have heard of?’

‘What?’ said the old man, lost in a dream. He was still looking at the drawings on the wall.

‘Dinner’s here!’ Saturninus half-bawled as the kitchen women came into the room carrying steaming platters. Lupait came in with them, and she sat down to her brother’s right.

‘Have you been in the kitchen all this time?’ said Succatus, scowling at her.

‘Don’t start that again,’ Tigrid whispered immediately. ‘Leave her alone.’

‘Don’t go back to the kitchen yet,’ Saturninus said to the slaves when everything had been set down on the table. ‘Stay here and help the others clean the drawings off the walls.’

‘Go on,’ said Succatus to Lupait. ‘You heard him, kitchen girl. Get to work.’

Lupait ignored him and smiled sweetly at the guests.

‘I’m glad you’re all still here. We don’t get to have guests here very often. It’s nice to have company.’

‘Why are you so keen to get rid of my drawings?’ said Succatus to Saturninus. ‘Some of them are rather good, I think.’

‘It’s shameful,’ said Tigrid. ‘It’s blasphemy. Imagine if someone important came visiting here today. What would you say then?’

‘I’d tell him Saturninus did it.’

‘Will you be staying for long?’ said Lupait. ‘You’re all very welcome to stay here for as long as you like, you know.’

Vortigern snapped out of his reverie.

‘I’m afraid we have pressing business elsewhere, my dear. But if you ever visit Venta Belgarum after the plague is gone, you will find yourself a most welcome guest.’

The light went out of Lestin’s eyes at the mention of the plague in his hometown, replaced by a look of unfathomable sadness. He closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath.

The scraping of the soapy brushes grew loud in Saturninus’s ears. He was beginning to get overexcited. It wouldn’t matter so much if Succatus made a fool of himself in front of the

bishop, not really. His moment of triumph was getting closer. A crooked grin crept over his face.

‘Lupait would love that,’ said Succatus, ‘When she visits your house, she can sit in your kitchen all day talking to the slaves.’

‘Will you leave her alone?’ said Tigrid.

‘No, I won’t. I’m sick to death of her. All day long she’s in the kitchen stuffing her face, and then at night she’s hanging around the workshops or the college halls. It’s embarrassing. Look at the way she’s fawning over the guests, trying to get attention. They might be flattered if she didn’t act the same way around the slaves. She’s nothing but a silly fat little—’

And here he called her a very dirty Latin word, one which bore an unfortunate phonetic resemblance to her name. Lupait got up from her seat and ran out of the room, sobbing. Everyone at the table was eyeing Succatus with unfettered hatred, except for Saturninus, who was still drunk on excitement. Eldol chewed his thumb and murmured to himself, ‘*don’t hit him, don’t hit him, don’t hit him...*’

The slaves carried on cleaning as if nothing had happened. They were used to it.

‘You’re a disgrace,’ said Tigrid. ‘You bring nothing but shame to our family. Look at what you’ve done to our grandfather’s house! Look at the way you bully your sister!’

Succatus threw up his hands in a flamboyant gesture of protest.

‘She deserves it. I don’t speak to you that way, do I?’

‘You don’t speak to me that way because you know I’d knock every tooth out of your head if you did.’

‘Well, she makes me sick with the way she acts. Fawning over everyone she meets like a whore.’

‘She’s lonely, Succatus. She’s eighteen years old, and she’s had to move to a monastery hundreds of miles from where she grew up. She must be going out of her mind. Gentlemen, please excuse my brother’s behaviour. I’m so ashamed.’

It had all become too much for Saturninus. The noise and tension had stirred him up to the point where any remaining shreds of sophistication were dashed away from his plan. He slammed one shaking fist onto the tabletop and brought the other close to Vortigern’s face.

‘What’s your family name, old man?’

Everyone was gaping at him now, astonished, except for Vortigern, who looked as though he had expected this all along. He answered him, level-eyed and level-voiced.

‘I think you know.’

Saturninus drew back and took a couple of deep breaths. It was best to keep a cool head, especially with the way Eldol was sizing him up with his eyes. He drew his sword.

‘Yes; your family name is Vitalinus. I fought against your men a long time ago, and we beat you, but your heathens murdered our general and robbed us of our victory. Men are coming here to arrest you now. It’s all over.’

XIX

Had circumstances been different, the plan might have worked beautifully. On any other day Saturninus might have had time to watch it all unfold, to let events take care of themselves. But the plan was doomed from the outset, because disaster had come to visit the Theodosian College that day.

While Iniris's infantry troops were joining up with Glivis's cavalry wing miles away, disaster was mere footsteps from the stockade that encircled the college. Disaster had crept along the coast early that morning and set up camp at the foot of the cliffs. It had found a blind spot between the two lookout posts on the clifftop, and had crawled through the long grass with the patience of a lioness stalking its prey. On that day, disaster had come to murder and enslave, and it had come in the person of Ercaid Maccu-Treni.

Ercaid had waited for the full moon of Beltain, the most auspicious time to embark on a voyage. This campaign was too important to rush into. Months ago he had sent men across the Muir Éireann to explore this part of the coast, and after choosing his targets he had rallied together his brothers. They in turn rallied the fighting men in their service, and while the sacred fires of Beltain blazed in the hills above their homes, they all sailed out in their curraghs from the province of the Ulaid.

A pestilence had struck their homeland. The farm workers had died in droves, and the fields were filled with smoke from the mass pyres. There was no one left to till, to sow or to reap. But Ercaid Maccu-Treni had seen his destiny. He had stared long and deep into the smoke of the plague pyres until a sort of dream came over him, and there he had seen his own face smiling out from the flame as though it were a mirror.

The sign was a good one. He would take his men across the Muir Éireann and go raiding, as his people had always done. He would take back a cargo of slaves bigger than any seen before. He would enslave dozens, hundreds if he could. This funny little priest-village would be only the first of many places he would strike.

What fool must have built this place and called it a fortress? That stockade would never withstand an earnest attack. The banks and ditches outside were too shallow to provide an effective defence, but they made a convenient hiding place for the men of the Ulaid. Here they were now, invisible from the priest-village and the fields around it, waiting for Ercaid's signal.

Ercaid crouched in the ditch and watched the sky. He was waiting for a sign. Then he saw it, or rather he heard it first: the call of a crow. He picked out the little black shape that swooped and weaved against the blue, and watched it until it lingered for a moment, circling over the open gate.

The sign was a good one. Morrigan, the shadow queen, had spoken.

Ercaid raised his spear, beckoned to his men, and led them out onto the path in front of the gate. The men of the Ulaid ran in quick light steps, keeping in mind Ercaid's command that no war cry must be uttered until the first dozen defenders were dead.

Coming out of his fourth lesson of the day, Ambris found Calixus waiting for him outside the school hall. The monk spotted him straight away even in the midst of the chattering spill of children and waved to him, calling out his name. He had waited for Ambris like that at the end of every lesson today. It was embarrassing. Why could the monk not go back home to Armorica now?

'How was your lesson, Ambris?' said Calixus.

'Fine,' said the boy, fighting the urge to hurry past him.

'What was the subject?'

'Astronomy.'

'Indeed? And which facet in particular?'

'I don't remember.'

'Astronomy... I myself never cared for it. The writings on the subject are for the most part very old, passed down from the ancients of Athens. I do not deny that the Hellenes made great advances in natural philosophy. But they were not always right. They invented, after all, such idols as Apollo and Mithras. Do men still cringe from the sound of thunder, fancying that Jupiter is angry? No man has, I am quite certain, heard the Music of the Spheres as described by Pythias. I would reserve my belief in such a proposition until I had a firm indication of its veracity. Don't you agree?'

That was Calixus. He did not have conversations with people, but unloaded monologues upon them.

'Pythagoras,' the boy said under his breath.

'I didn't hear you.'

'You don't know anything...' The boy's voice was thick with disgust.

'Ambris, is something troubling you?'

'No.'

'Have I said something to offend you? If I did, I assure you...'

Ambris looked at Calixus, imagining how it would feel to punch him in the face. He was finding it harder to control his temper lately. He had seen the same behaviour in older boys, and had always promised himself that it would never happen to him. Now he supposed he might as well prepare himself for pimples and chin hair as well.

He heard shouting, and he turned to see where it was coming from. At first he saw only blood, a great puddle of it snaking out across the dust and quickly losing its brightness in the dry heat. In the doorway of the chapel closest to the gate, a group of strangers had appeared. They towered over the children. Their swords were dripping red. The bodies of young boys lay scattered around them with nightmarish injuries to their heads and faces. More men were coming, red-haired and bare-chested. They shouted to one another in a language that was not Latin, Britannic nor Saxon, and their weapons were like none that Ambris had ever seen.

'Blessed Father in heaven, hear our plea. You who have already twice delivered us from the jaws of death, deliver us a third time that we might...'

Calixus was on his knees, praying with his eyes closed. Ambris grabbed a handful of the monk's habit and shook him.

'Get up.'

Calixus's eyes opened, but he did not move.

'Join me in prayer, my boy. It is our only hope. The very hosts of hell are here to claim us. Pray with me.'

'Now's not the time. Get up.'

'What do you mean?'

'Where are Lucius and his sons? We need to find them.'

'They... they are at the principal's house with Saturninus.'

Ambris pulled Calixus's habit again, this time toppling him over.

'Get up. We're going to the principal's house.'

Calixus got up and looked around. He saw fire, and he shrank at the sight of it like an animal. The intruders had herded a number of monks and boys into the kennels and had set the straw roof alight. The sound of collective prayer from inside and was quickly drowned out by the howling of Lestin's dogs.

'Come on, Calixus!'

'I'm coming.'

Calixus reached out. Ambris forgot his adolescent pride and took the monk's hand, and together they ran for the gate at the north end of the college grounds.

And how the priest-children wept and wailed as the men of the Ulaid rounded them up and herded them into the burning barns! Sheep were worthier beasts than these. If Ercaid's own sons were to give themselves so readily to tears, it would be a shameful thing, nurselings though they still were. The adults were no better. None would turn and fight, men though they were. This too was a curious thing: there were no womenfolk among them that Ercaid could see. How, then, did these priests produce young?

'Give welcome to him that comes to you!' Ercaid cried after the cowed men, holding his spear aloft while they ran from him. 'Of the men of the Ulaid am I, and Ercaid Maccu-Treni is my name!'

But no one would accept the challenge.

Ercaid was puzzled. He knew nothing of these priests of Britain except that they were cowardly and foolish, and that they worshipped a man instead of a god. Ercaid remembered when one of them had come to have an audience with his kinsman, the King of the Dál Araide. The priest's name was unpronounceable in the Éireann tongue; the closest they could get to it was Bledius or Cledius, and that was not very close at all. He had come to persuade all the men of the Dál Araide to shun the gods of their fathers. The king found Bledius-or-Cledius amusing, so he did not kill him. He only thrust him into a bog up to his armpits, chopped off his hair and rubbed cow dung into his scalp.

'A woman!' cried a voice from over to Ercaid's left. His half-brother Lugaid had caught hold of a shrieking girl by her hair. It was hard to tell at this distance, but she looked pretty and healthy enough. 'I have found a woman, Ercaid!'

'How many summers has she seen?'

'Not more than twenty, I should say.'

‘Leave her alive, then. Take her to your curragh, but not to your pillow. She will fetch a higher price if she is whole.’

The crows called overhead. The raid was still young, and the priests and priest-children still had plenty of chase left in them. Even now they were bolting for the gate on the far side of the enclosure, beyond which a meadow of long grass stretched far into the distance. Ercaid would let them run. Those who stumbled or tired quickly would be slaughtered where they fell, and those who lasted longest in the chase would be harvested for the slave markets in Ériu. Ercaid would get a good price for them. His wife and the sons she had borne him would not go hungry this year, or for years to come.

He stretched out his arms and sighed with inward satisfaction. The cracking and snapping of the fire grew louder, and the prayers perished on the lips of those within.

XX

In spite of everything, Vortigern's appetite was good. He had finished his dinner and was chewing on a bone, trying to get the last few scraps of meat from it.

'You are making a very grave mistake,' he said, running his tongue over his teeth. 'And you'll end up in a lot of trouble if you carry on.'

Saturninus was somewhat wrong-footed by the old man's apparent lack of concern.

'What can you possibly mean? You can't do anything.'

'Can't I? Oh, we shall see about that. I wonder what they'll say in Londinium when they hear about this. Do you think they'll stand back and let you imprison their appointed leader without complaint? Do you realise, Saturninus, that you will bring the armies of the Consilium to your door?'

'They won't come.'

'I assure you they will.'

'Then why are you running? Half the consiliars are against you, and the rest are dead. Oh yes, we know all about that. That kind of news travels fast. No, your soldiers in Londinium aren't going to come looking for you. But everyone else will. You're finished, Vitalinus.'

Vortigern reclined in his chair, rocking on the back legs.

'Whoever might be against me, I am still the head of the Consilium. You have no right to detain me.'

'I have every right. I'm arresting you—'

'Arresting me!'

'—arresting you for heresy, corruption, murder, tyranny, treason—'

'You don't have the authority to arrest me.'

'I'm arresting you on Bishop Germanus's authority.'

'Bishop Germanus has no authority here.'

'His authority comes from God.'

'No,' said Vortigern, brandishing the gnawed bone like a gavel. 'His authority comes from the Bishop of Roma, and it only applies to those foolish enough to believe his rot. As head of the Consilium, I order you to release us at once and give us back our weapons.'

Succatus had sat slack-mouthed through all that had been said so far. Now he attempted to venture his opinion.

'Saturninus, maybe he's—'

'Shut your mouth, boy!'

The effects of sixteen years of pampering are not easily undone. Succatus had never been spoken to like that before.

‘What did you say to me?’

He shoved the monk against the table. Saturninus reeled, caught his balance, and then grabbed Succatus around the throat with his free hand. The boy struggled, making dry noises in his throat. Tigrid got up and beat her fists on Saturninus’s back and shoulders.

‘Get off him! Leave him alone!’

The slaves looked around at them and then carried on cleaning the walls. Eldol eased quietly out of his seat.

‘Stop!’ Saturninus turned round and showed Eldol that he still had the sword in his right hand. ‘Sit back down. Go on.’

He let go of Succatus, and there was a loud intake of breath.

‘Saturninus...’ Tigrid was so angry she could hardly speak. ‘Saturninus... what do you think you’re...’

‘I’m going to kill you.’ Succatus’s voice was shrill, and he had tears in his eyes. *‘I’m going to kill you...’*

Then Calixus and Ambris burst in and pushed past the guard.

‘Raiders!’ Calixus cried. ‘Quickly, where is the wagon?’

‘Oh, what now?’

Saturninus thumped back down into his seat and struck at the table with the pommel of his sword. Some bits of food spilled onto his lap.

‘There are raiders, brother. They are burning down the college.’

Everyone started talking at once, and the first soft notes of panic began to swell in their voices. Saturninus struck the table again for silence.

‘What do you mean, burning down? How did they get past the stockade? Who’s in charge of the defences?’

Then it hit him, like a fist to the stomach, that he was supposed to be in charge. He had never trained anyone to oversee the defences in the event of his absence. All that was left was an unmanned perimeter, a few score monks and a couple of hundred boys too weak and timid to hold a weapon.

They were defenceless.

He got up and ran out of the door. The slaves in the courtyard had all stopped working, and now they stood at the south gate looking out towards the college. Saturninus joined them. Across the meadow he saw the bright orange shimmer turning the straw roofs black as it ate them away. And yes, he could hear voices dim and distant. Little shrieks and yells that sounded at first like the shrieks and yells he heard every day, when the children played together between lessons. But now it was different. Now he knew what was happening to them.

He saw the little dark figures of boys coming across the meadow towards him, thumping through the long grass as fast as their legs would carry them. Some of the boys stumbled and fell forward into the grass as they ran, and they did not get up again. More of them came running, and more of them pitched face-first to the ground. Saturninus saw the pale arrow shafts sticking out from the little boys’ backs.

The raiders were following the boys out onto the meadow, and now they had spotted the villa. At the first sight of them Saturninus was struck by an odd notion. They were all bare-chested and bare-legged, with no armour except for the odd bronze helmet here and there.

They looked like the paintings he had seen of the heroes from the Trojan War. They were costumed for the death scene that Saturninus had invented for himself.

He chuckled blackly, and then the distance closed enough for the illusion to be dispelled. The raiders were tribesmen from Hibernia, and they were getting closer with every second.

Saturninus slid his sword back into its sheath and turned around. Everyone had come out from the dining hall into the courtyard, and they all squinted hopefully at him in the blinding sunlight. To his relief and theirs, he was calm now.

‘It’s the Scoti,’ he said. ‘One of the northern tribes, from the look of them. The college is lost to us; there’s nothing we can do about that. But we can save ourselves, and probably the villa too. I know how we can drive them away. First, we all need to go back into the dining hall and bar the door that opens onto the courtyard.’

‘What about the children?’ said Tigrid. ‘Good lord, what about Lupait? She’s still out there, Saturninus.’

Saturninus held up his hand.

‘I know, I haven’t forgotten. But first we must protect ourselves. If this works, we’ll be out of danger in a few moments, and we’ll be able to go out and look for her.’

‘What do you have in mind?’ said Vortigern.

‘It’s quite simple,’ said Saturninus. ‘The layout of the villa gives us an advantage. In fact it’s a little stratagem you might be familiar with, Vitalinus. Your friend Cunedag used the same trick to rout the Scoti from Segontium all those years ago. They say he was outnumbered five to one, but still he slaughtered half of them and drove the rest out onto the beach, running for their lives.’

‘Go on.’

‘Once the door opening out onto the courtyard is barred, the only other entrance to the dining hall is from this cloister that comes around the inner perimeter here. Now, naturally the children will enter there and make their way around, and naturally the raiders will follow them.’

‘And then?’

Saturninus smiled slightly, and his shoulders hitched as if with a silent laugh, but he said nothing. For a moment it looked as though a little halo of pink mist hung in the air around his head. Then he was lying face down on the ground, and they all saw the arrow sticking out from the base of his skull. Tigrid began to scream.

‘Eldol,’ said Vortigern, ‘pick him up and carry him inside, quickly. Everyone, listen to me. Do not panic. We need to do exactly as Saturninus said. Now, make your way into the hall quickly and calmly.’

Relieved that someone was taking charge, everyone went back inside. Eldol scooped up Saturninus’s twitching body and hurried into the dining hall. The two workshop slaves barred the door behind him.

‘Set him down on the table, Eldol,’ said Vortigern. ‘Is he dead?’

One of Saturninus’s eyelids was fluttering rapidly, while the other was still. Faint noises came from his throat. Thin, watery blood trickled from his nose, and darker stuff seeped out of the arrow wound. Eldol did not dare look at the back of his head.

‘No... not really.’

Vortigern bent his head close to the dying monk and spoke to him in a gentle, cajoling

tone, as though he were trying to coax a child out of a tantrum.

‘Saturninus? Can you hear me? We are back in the hall now, and your men have barred the door. Now, what was the next stage of your plan?’

Saturninus made no sign that he heard or understood.

‘My lord,’ said Lestin, ‘what was that he was saying about Cunedag getting rid of the Scoti in a situation like this?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ said Vortigern. ‘I never involved myself in Cunedag’s campaigns. Succatus, are there any more weapons in the house?’

‘None at all.’

‘And there are only these two exits... what’s out there?’ Vortigern pointed to an open window in the far wall.

‘The gardens, and the workshops. Only you can’t get into the workshops from that direction. The doors are on the other—’

‘That’s fine. And beyond the gardens?’

‘The woods.’

‘Fine, fine. Eldol, hand me my sword, would you?’

Eldol’s stomach turned at the request. He did not want to touch the twitching, bleeding ruin that lay on the table again. Saturninus was still not quite dead. The fact that his skin was still warm to the touch seemed somehow obscene.

‘Eldol?’

Closing his eyes to the blood-bubbles that still formed anew on Saturninus’s lips, he reached out and groped under the habit. The monk was naked under the coarse cloth. Eldol had to endure the touch of his hairy, sweat-sticky skin before he found the cold metal nestled in a bed of soft belly flesh. He undid the buckle and pulled. The belt drew taut, since the monk’s weight was still on it, and his body jerked as Eldol pulled. As the sword belt came free, the habit rode up over the waist, exposing the poor man’s pale and sagging nakedness to the room just as he was trying and failing to cling to his final breath.

‘Eldol?’

Eldol handed the sword belt to Vortigern and then quickly pulled Saturninus’s habit back down to cover his legs. The eyelid had stopped twitching, and the blood bubbles had stopped forming on the lips.

Vortigern addressed the room as he buckled on his sword belt.

‘We’re leaving. We are going through that window and heading for the woods. If we’re quick enough, the Scoti will not find us there.’ He turned to the two workshop slaves. ‘Give my men their swords back.’

The slaves looked at Succatus. He appeared uninterested, so they did as they were told.

Vortigern continued.

‘If any of you wants to live beyond the next few minutes, then I suggest you follow us.’

‘I’m staying here,’ said Succatus.

‘But that’s madness,’ said Eldol. ‘You’ll be killed if you stay. Come on now, we can make it to the woods.’

The young man shook his head.

‘Lupait is out there somewhere. If she’s still alive, she might come back home. I’m going to wait here for her.’

‘So am I,’ said Tigrid.

‘Well what about the rest of you?’ said Eldol to the room in general. The slaves looked at him, and then looked at the floor. They were the property of the principal’s family, and the principal’s family were staying.

‘What about you, Calixus?’ said Vortigern. ‘I take it Saturninus told you who I really am. Where do you stand?’

‘By your side,’ said the monk with a solemn little bow of his head. ‘The politics of this world are quite beyond my understanding. I am concerned only with what the Lord—’

‘Fine, fine,’ said Vortigern.

Eldol noticed that Ambris was staring at the old man with what looked like the most profound hatred in his eyes.

Then all was confusion. Terrible noises came through the walls—cries of fear and of bloodlust, little footsteps in the cloister, and heavier footsteps following them. The slaves prayed and wept. Succatus and Tigrid held each other. The five travellers who had come in the wagon to the Theodosian College bolted for the window in the far wall.

The window was wide enough and not too high, so they all got through without much trouble. They hurried to the high hedge at the bottom of the garden. Eldol overcame this obstacle by lifting each of his companions in turn and flinging them over the top into the grass on the other side. It took him a while to climb over the top afterwards, and he scratched his arms and legs quite badly.

The forest ahead looked dark and eerie, but with the smell of smoke and the sound of murder still heavy on the air, it was much more inviting than the villa gardens. They found their way by keeping an eye on the position of the sun. When they emerged on the other side they were greeted with a sight they had hardly dared hope for: the road.

‘Lord be praised!’ said Calixus. ‘Could this be the road to Bomium, perhaps?’

‘It must be,’ said Vortigern. ‘There’s no other road in these parts. Now you must decide here, Calixus, if you want to continue in my company or not. If you follow this road east, you will eventually find yourself back in Isca—if you do not, that is, chance upon those villagers again. After that, the next town is Venta Silurum. They’re rather keen on foreign clerics there at the moment, so no doubt they’ll welcome you with open arms.’

‘Our destination was the Theodosian College, and that unhappy place is no more. If you are content to let us stay with you, then it would be our great honour to do so.’

‘But does it not conflict with your loyalties? As I’m sure Saturninus told you, there are certain agents of the Church who are bent on my downfall. They may yet achieve their goal. Are you certain you want to follow me?’

‘Quite certain. I am sure I can be useful to you, my lord. I am no warrior but I am rather a good cook, if I may permit myself a small boast.’

‘And what about young Ambris?’

Everyone looked at the boy, who stood half-hidden behind the monk.

‘I’d like to come,’ he said quietly.

‘Then it’s settled,’ said Vortigern, and he slipped his hand into the pouch on his belt. When he pulled it out again they saw that he wore the heavy gold ring with the ruby dragon’s head that was his family emblem. He held his fist out in front of him at waist height, and he said nothing more, but the monk and the boy knew what was expected of them.

A disquieted look came over the monk's face. This was, of course, very much like the obeisance performed before the Bishop of Roma. It was perhaps unfair to ask such a thing of him. But after a moment's squirming, he fell down on one knee and kissed the carved ruby as though it were a large spider. When it was done, he got up and moved away, looking shaken. The boy indulged in no such histrionics. He took Vortigern's hand, briskly kissed the ring, and moved back into the monk's shadow.

'Good,' said Vortigern, putting the ring back in his pouch. 'I'm glad to have you both along. You were kind enough to show me hospitality when I needed it most, and I will be pleased to return the kindness. Things are hard for us now, but things will return to normal, I promise you. Ah, but I'm getting ahead of myself. I'd better inform you of our destination. We are going to Venedotia to seek shelter with my ally, Cunedag Creiserit. Do you know who that is?'

'The name is familiar,' said Calixus, lowering his eyes.

'But what are we going to do now?' said Eldol.

'That's just what I'd like to know,' said Lestin, plainly irritated by the pantomime Vortigern had played with the monk and the boy. 'Granted, we haven't been murdered yet. But we've got no horse, no wagon, and no food. That, and my dogs have probably been burnt alive by those dirty cow-chasing sons-of-whores back there!'

'I am afraid it is so,' said Calixus. 'The Scoti burnt down the kennels upon entering the college.'

Lestin did not thank him for the information.

'We must do the only thing we can do,' said Vortigern with that maddening cheerfulness that he reserved for moments like this. 'We follow the road on foot. It's not far to Bomium, and if we do not find horses there, we must continue to the next town. If we do not find horses there, we must move on to the next town after that, and so on.'

'*Right then!*' said Lestin, striking into a furious stride up the road. 'We'd better not waste any time, had we?'

The others followed at a prudent distance.

XXI

Bomium had seen better days. The brickyard and the ironworks had closed down long ago, and most of the houses were rotted away to grass-covered shells. Rather than a market town, it might be better described as an empty space in the middle of nothing.

The one going concern left in Bomium was Troucas the horse breeder. Glivis paid him a handsome salary to raise horses, specifically the big powerful horses suitable for heavy cavalry. His wife was long dead, and over the years his neighbours had deserted the town, but he had grown accustomed to the solitude.

At present there were only five adult horses in the paddock. First there was Isaac, the monstrous white stallion who had sired more warhorses than anyone could count. Troucas tended to think of Isaac as his best friend. He treated the three mares with courtly deference, but had no real fondness for them. The fifth horse was Ismael, a black gelding who used to pull Troucas's cart on market days, but lately did very little. As well as the adults there were the two new foals, both male, whom Troucas had not yet got around to naming.

Today was to have been a turning point in Troucas's life. The Theodosian College had asked him to take on an apprentice, a fourteen-year-old orphan whose bullying of the other boys had got him expelled. Troucas was excited about receiving the boy into his home. Today he was wearing clean clothes, and he was still sober even though it was already nearing the end of the afternoon. In fact the boy was very late. But solitude had taught Troucas patience, and he forgave the wasted day when a knock finally sounded on the door.

He lifted the latch and threw open the door, but he was at a loss when he saw that the boy was not there. Instead there were three men, all with swords on their belts. Their clothes looked like they had been slept in more than once. One of them was a huge fellow with thinning hair and a face that looked half-finished. The second was compact and wiry, and his face was covered in yellowing bruises. The third of the strangers, a gaunt and white-haired old gentleman, bowed to Troucas.

'Good afternoon, my good man. We were passing through, and we could not help noticing that you rear horses here. Is there somewhere we could talk?'

It was too hot to walk and certainly too hot to run away, so Calixus and Ambris sat where they were and sweated.

There were no trees outside the walls of Bomium, no shade anywhere. The grass on either side of the road was parched and yellow. Vortigern had told them to wait a good distance back up the road from the horse breeder's house. He did not say why, and they did not ask. Sitting on the yellow grass at the roadside, they now at least enjoyed a moment of privacy.

‘I could not have guessed that things might happen this way,’ said Calixus, mopping his brow with his sleeve. ‘I had my reservations, of course, when the abbot told me he wanted to send you back. My last memories of Britannia were... how can I describe it? I suppose you remember very little about your homeland.’

‘I remember my parents,’ said the boy.

‘Is that all?’

‘I remember being told to hide, a lot. Being frightened all the time. My little brother crying. Never spending more than one night in the same place, and always being surrounded by soldiers.’

‘And now you have come home to the same situation all over again. My poor boy... you were only four years old when we left. Did you know, Ambris, that it was I who took you over the sea to Armorica?’

‘Yes. You were at the monastery near where my parents were killed.’

Calixus’s face softened.

‘The abbot told you? Yes, that’s right. Your father’s people brought you to the monastery, you and your brother, and they asked me to hide you. They asked me to take you as far away as I could. We left that very night. The next morning, your father’s enemies attacked the monastery and killed everyone inside.’ His face tensed up again, and the gloomy tremolo came back into his voice. ‘Are you sure you want to do this, Ambris? We could run.’

‘You can go if you like.’

‘Never. I am your protector, Ambris.’

‘No, you’re not,’ said the boy, and it was the truth. The last two days had changed everything.

‘But surely you can see it would be safer if we went back.’

‘That’s not the point. Why did you volunteer to go with them if you didn’t want to?’

‘They would have killed us if I had done otherwise.’

‘What do you think they’ll do if they come out of that house and catch us sneaking away? Or if they get horses and catch up with us?’

Calixus had no answer for that. He peered back up the road at the horse breeder’s house, watching for any sign of movement.

‘I don’t see why they made us wait out here.’

‘We’d get in the way.’

‘But in the way of what?’

‘Wait—what’s that?’

The boy pointed to a tiny dark blot on the landscape, at the point where the road tapered into the horizon. As it approached through the heat haze the blot grew larger and took form, and the outline of a man riding a donkey emerged. They saw that he carried no visible weapons and they relaxed a little. Only a little. His eyesight must have been very poor, since he did not seem aware of their presence until he was about half a dozen yards away. Then he nodded a greeting, and steered his donkey towards them.

‘A good afternoon to you, young sirs,’ he said in an accent they could not place. ‘Could it be that you’re both stranded by the wayside here, and in need of some help?’

They had to be careful not to say the wrong thing. It would be an absurd end if they were to die right where they were, bleeding out from slit throats, while the stranger pawed at their

clothes for money they did not have.

‘Not at all, sir,’ said Calixus. ‘We are waiting for some acquaintances of ours.’

The rider flashed his rotten teeth.

‘I suppose you’re not from round here.’

‘We... we are citizens, just poor men of the Church, passing through this region.’

‘Ah yes, I’d noticed you’re a man of the Church, sir. That makes me all the more glad to have stopped.’ The rider laughed thickly, and his tongue spilled out over his yellow stumps. ‘I’m just on my way now to see a man of the Church myself. Bishop Germanus over in Venta Silurum. I’m hoping he might cure what ails me.’

Ambris and Calixus looked at each other, and then hurriedly got to their feet.

‘Take us with you.’ Calixus said, hoarse and wide-eyed. ‘Please, good sir, we—’

‘Pull yourself together!’ Ambris snapped at the monk. ‘Do you think he can fit the both of us on the donkey with him?’

‘I don’t mind if you walk along with me,’ said the rider, though he looked dubious. ‘I don’t mind riding slow. What’s the matter, are you in trouble?’

Calixus cleared his throat, and his face was calm again.

‘Forgive my outburst, good sir. Yes, we are in very deep trouble indeed. I am Paulinus Calixus of the monastery at Corisopitum. The young master’s name is Ambris.’

The man said nothing, but offered them his hand. It had black dirt ground into every line in the skin. They both shook it hurriedly.

‘And you are on your way to see the bishop, sir?’ said Calixus.

‘I am. I’ve heard great things about Bishop Germanus, and I’m awful impatient to see him. They tell me he’s a great healer, and that he can cure sicknesses of all kinds.’

‘You are ill?’

‘I’ve got sicknesses of all kinds.’

This threw Calixus for a moment.

‘I... I am sorry to hear that. Could I ask you to deliver a message to Bishop Germanus when you see him? It’s very important.’

The man blinked and rubbed the back of his neck.

‘Oh, well, that’s... I’ve no writing things on me, and... well, I don’t know how to write, anyway.’

‘Can you remember it?’

‘I’ll do my best.’

‘Thank you. Kindly tell the bishop that Ambris, the young ward of his colleague the Abbot Corentinus, has been taken hostage by Vortigern. If we attempt to escape, we will surely be recaptured and killed. We are being taken to the stronghold of Cunedag in Venedotia, and we desperately need the bishop’s help.’

The man looked flustered.

‘Oh... I’ll never remember all those names, you know. I’m sorry.’

‘But surely you have heard of Cunedag?’

‘No.’

‘You have never even heard his name? What about Vortigern?’

‘No, sir, I’m afraid not.’

Ambris cleared his throat.

‘Tell him,’ he said to the man, ‘that the red dragon seeks shelter among the nine hundred.’

‘Oh,’ said the man, ‘What is it, poetry?’

‘It’s a code.’

‘But I don’t understand it.’

‘You don’t need to; you just need to remember it.’

‘Oh, I see.’

‘Do you remember it?’

‘I think so.’

‘Repeat it to me then.’

The man repeated the message to Ambris. It was perfect, exactly as the boy had said it, but the man still looked confused.

‘Excellent,’ said Calixus. ‘Thank you very much, sir. We truly are grateful.’

At no point before they reached the horse breeder’s house did Vortigern state that he intended to commit a robbery. It would be untrue, however, to say that Eldol crossed the threshold with a clear conscience. He knew that the eight miliaresia in Vortigern’s purse would not cover the cost of even a single horse. He didn’t dare ask what would happen. Instead he trailed behind Vortigern and Lestin with his pulse drumming in his ears.

The living room smelt as though the same volume of air had been trapped inside it for years. Their host gestured towards the chairs, but they did not sit. Vortigern was eager to get right to the point.

‘What is your name?’

The owner of the house answered with his eyes on the ground, wringing the skirt of his tunic in his hands.

‘Troucas, sir.’

‘Do you live alone, Troucas?’

‘Yes, sir. My wife and sons are dead.’

‘I should like to see your horses, Troucas.’

‘Right this way, sir.’

He took them down another corridor and out into the paddock. The three mares they had seen from the road milled about idly, and they could see the nose of a fourth animal poking out of the stable door. Vortigern went and stood there for a moment, gazing up at the old white stallion inside.

‘Excellent,’ he said, and he rejoined the others. ‘We’ll take all four.’

‘Sir?’

‘The stallion and the three mares. We will take them.’

Troucas sagged.

‘Not possible.’

‘I didn’t hear you.’

‘It’s not possible, sir.’

Vortigern came up close to Troucas with his hands behind his back and stared him down.

‘Now, why do you say that?’

Troucas was a good twenty years younger than Vortigern, half a head taller and twice his weight, but it made no difference. He was so frightened, he did not even dare wipe away the

drop of mucus that hung and swelled on the end of his nose.

‘I can’t sell them, sir. They’re the property of the magistrate at Tamium, sir. I have to breed the horses for my lord Glivis, sir, and these are—’

‘That won’t be a problem. Glivis is an acquaintance of mine. Now, if you would be good enough to fetch the saddles and bridles, we will be on our way.’

‘But I can’t sir, honestly, I can’t. Not the stallion and the mares. I’ve got a gelding and a cart I could sell to you. Wouldn’t that be better, sir?’

Eldol could have kissed him for his good sense. It would be slow and uncomfortable riding to Venedotia like that, but not much worse than Lestin’s wagon as long as it did not rain. But then Eldol saw the look on Vortigern’s face, and his hopes faded into the air. The old man was enjoying himself.

‘This is the last time I’ll ask you. Fetch the saddlery for the horses at once.’

Troucas looked at the floor dumbly, as though he thought he might just come out of this unscathed if he did nothing at all, if he said nothing at all... If Vortigern had made an open threat, maybe Troucas would have done as he was told. Even raising his voice might have been enough.

Instead, Vortigern drew his sword and thrust the point into the horse breeder’s chest.

Troucas cried out and staggered back. He took his hand away from the dark circle that was spreading out around the slit in his tunic. It was not a serious injury. Vortigern’s sword was too heavy for him, and the thrust was poorly executed. The old man slashed at Troucas’s head, but he was too slow. Troucas caught him by the wrists and butted him in the nose. Vortigern sank to his knees with a groan, still holding the sword, and still held by Troucas.

‘Get out of here!’ Troucas shouted. ‘Get out of my home!’

He squeezed, and the sword fell out of Vortigern’s grip.

Eldol and Lestin stood facing each other on either side of the struggle, and they each read the look on the other’s face. The same thought had occurred to both of them, but it was no use. Their mutiny crumbled without a word being said out loud. For reasons neither really understood, they both drew their swords and hacked Troucas to death where he stood.

XXII

All eyes were on Hengest as he reined in at the riverbank that marked the frontier of his kingdom. They were waiting to see how he would react to what had happened here, to what his firstborn had done.

‘Our best days are behind us,’ he said finally.

The river was choked with corpses, most of them Britons, too many to count. It was not what Hengest had expected to see. As soon as the alarm was raised, he had pulled every fighting man he could find out of Durovernum and had got here as quickly as he could. But now it was all over, and the reinforcements he had brought would not be needed after all.

‘My lord?’ said the ealdorman Guthlaf, who had ridden there with him. Apart from himself and the king, there were only a few score horsemen present. The hundreds who had set out with them on foot from Durovernum were still hours away.

Hengest pointed to the river, where the backs of many heads bobbed in the red water.

‘This is our future now. Everything we worked for has led us to this.’

‘There’s still time to save it, my lord.’

‘Time, yes. But we’re only men, and fate might have other ideas.’

He turned around, and Guthlaf could not help but wince at the sight of his face. He looked more frightening than ever with the broken nose and lingering black eyes that the Britannic magistrate had given him five days ago. Guthlaf could hardly bear to look at him.

It had been a hard couple of months. First Ordlaaf and his men were murdered in Londinium. No one had expected that to happen, and of course there were many whose first thought was to strike back against the Britons. Guthlaf had done his best to give good counsel to the king, but it felt more and more like his efforts were pointless. War was coming whether they wanted it or not.

Hengest’s son came to him now, hoisted on the shoulders of his cheering men, crusted with blood and dirt from the thick of the battle. His name was Oisc. When his men set him on his feet, he approached his father’s horse with a cocksure grin.

‘Sorry there isn’t more for you to do, Father. My men were eager.’

Hengest dismounted.

‘So I see. Tell me what happened.’

‘I’ve lost about fifty men at most. The *waelisc* died in their hundreds, though. I kept one of them alive so we could question him, but he doesn’t speak any Jutish. The rest got away.’

‘Start from the beginning, Oisc. What happened with the Saxons?’

It had begun with a settling of accounts. After the massacre at Ambrosius’s fort, Hengest had ordered Oisc to lead his men across the Tamesis and wipe Cuthwulf’s little kingdom off

the face of the earth. As Oisc now told his father, it was easier than it ought to have been.

‘There was no sign of Cuthwulf anywhere. We got to that ugly brick house of his but there were only a few slaves there. It was empty otherwise. We went on to the villages around the house, but there were only farmers there. It wasn’t much fun killing them. Still, Cuthwulf will turn up again before long, and now he’s got no kingdom to go home to.’

‘Go on.’

‘When it looked like we’d done all we could, we started on our way back home. All these soldiers were here waiting for us. They killed maybe ten or fifteen of ours on the first rush, but then my lads dragged their leader off his horse and killed him. After that they broke formation, and we managed to trap them with their backs to the river. I sent the scout back to get reinforcements, just in case, but I needn’t have bothered. We made short work of them, Father.’

‘Who are they?’

‘I don’t know yet. I was thinking our new friend might tell us. Lads! Bring the prisoner up.’

‘Wait, Oisc. What about Cuthwulf?’

‘He wasn’t there, Father. Like I said, though, he’s got no kingdom to come home to. We burnt everything.’

‘And my grandson?’

Hengest was referring to the boy Pascent. Guthlaf watched Oisc’s face closely now and felt a secret delight at the unease he saw there. It was bad news, and Oisc did not want to tell it. Hengest had seen it too.

‘Spit it out, boy!’

‘I took some of the lads to Verulamium, like you said,’ Oisc began, looking away. ‘And then to that fellow’s house in the countryside... what’s his name?’

‘Elaphius.’

‘That’s him. When we got to Verulamium, the town was all shut up, as though they were expecting trouble. Gates locked, archers on the walls... we couldn’t get near it. Elaphius’s house was empty. So we asked a few of Cuthwulf’s peasants if they’d seen the boy, and...’ Oisc sucked in air through his teeth. ‘Cuthwulf’s got him, Father. We don’t know where they’ve gone, or why, but—’

Hengest’s eyes had been dull and immobile, but now they smouldered.

‘Cuthwulf has him? What do you mean, Cuthwulf has him?’

Oisc had lost all his nerve. Guthlaf almost felt sorry for him.

‘I... well, that’s all I know, Father, honestly. It’s not my fault. They said he went west, but they don’t know why. We separated them and tortured them, but they all stuck to their story. There was nothing more I could do.’

Hengest made as if to strike his son. Oisc did not flinch, but then Hengest took a deep breath and let his balled fist fall to his side. It would be wrong to humiliate Oisc in front of the men.

‘We must find out what has happened,’ he said, calmer now. ‘If anything happens to that boy, then I swear I’ll burn this island from sea to sea. I am not surprised that Elaphius’s house was empty. His woman will know by now that he’s dead. But to think that Cuthwulf went in there and took my grandson...’

‘There’s still the prisoner, Father. We can at least find out where these soldiers came from.’

‘Bring him.’

The soldier whom Oisc had spared, a boy of no more than fifteen, fell quivering at Hengest’s feet. His back, arms and chest were covered in slash wounds where Oisc’s men had taken their knives to him. Corotic the interpreter got down from his horse and approached the sorry figure.

‘What shall I ask him?’

‘Ask him who he is,’ said Hengest. ‘Where he came from. Why.’

Corotic spoke in Britannic to the soldier, and translated the tearful and breathless responses.

‘He’s from Calleva. The magistrate there ordered that if he didn’t return from your meeting with Vortigern, then all his soldiers were to march against us and burn Durovernum to the ground. They chanced upon Oisc and his men here, and the rest you know.’

Hengest squatted by the prisoner and spoke to him in slow and careful Britannic.

‘It is honourable to avenge the death of one’s master. I take no pleasure in what I do now.’ Hengest drew his knife and cut the young soldier’s throat. Then he got to his feet and wiped the blood from the knife on his trousers before sheathing it.

‘So, Oisc. Now that you’ve left an army of dead men at the border of my kingdom, what do you suggest we do?’

Oisc answered immediately. ‘We should attack Londinium.’

‘And why?’

‘Because we’ve been struck, and we’ve got to strike back ten times as hard. The *waelisc* need to know that for every one of us that dies, ten of them will follow. Calleva’s too far away for us to take right now. Londinium, though... Londinium’s on our doorstep, and it’s their most important city. We should attack there.’

Oisc’s men cheered and beat their spears against their shields, but it was a tentative show. They were waiting to hear what Hengest would say.

‘And what then? Do we destroy it, or make it our own?’

‘Make it our own. Make it stronger than it ever was when it belonged to them.’

‘And then?’

‘We take Verulamium, then maybe Anderitum... then we hit Calleva. If we can secure that much, then holding on to Calleva should be no problem.’

‘And what about your nephew? I am asking, Oisc, what you think we should do about bringing Pascent home.’ Oisc’s face was blank. Hengest turned to Guthlaf. ‘And you, my friend. What do you think we ought to do?’

Guthlaf made a show of pondering the question. He knew Hengest did not like quick answers.

‘I think I have an idea, my lord.’

‘Tell me.’

‘We should keep most of our men in our own territory, in case of any more attacks. Then there’s the Saxons. A warband doesn’t just disappear overnight, my lord, even a piddling little one like theirs. I can lead a small troop into their territory, where we’ll pick up Cuthwulf’s trail and follow it. Once we’ve found your grandson, we’ll report back to you and

tell you everything we know.'

'Then you don't think we should attack Londinium.'

'Attacking their lands now would be foolish.' Guthlaf regretted the words as soon as they were out of his mouth, and he avoided Oisc's eye. 'If we do that then we run the risk of uniting them against us. Divided, they're no threat. But an organised army drawn from all their towns... if they united for long enough, they could wipe us out.'

Oisc called out to Guthlaf. 'So you don't like my plan?'

'I do not.'

'Are you really going to listen to this old *hildlata*, Father?'

A few of Oisc's men smiled guiltily. Guthlaf knew some of them by sight, fewer by name. Young monsters intent on acquiring fame through atrocity, just the sort to drag the kingdom down with them as they destroyed themselves.

'Oisc,' said Hengest, softly now. 'If you ever speak of one of my men in such a fashion again, then I will beat you as if you were half your age. Do you understand?'

Guthlaf felt a sudden terror that Hengest would force his son to apologise. But Oisc nodded that he understood, and Hengest left it at that. He spoke to the men at large.

'We're going home, for now. Gather our dead for burial and leave no weapons on the field. Oisc, come here.'

As Oisc shuffled towards his father, he paused to give Guthlaf what the ealdorman recognised as his 'fighting look', the one he pulled on passers-by in Durovernum whenever he had wanted to start a fight.

'Ignore him,' said a voice at Guthlaf's shoulder, his friend Eaha.

'I am ignoring him,' said Guthlaf in an undertone. 'But I'd like to have a private talk with him one of these days.'

'Put it out of your head. He'll be king one day.'

'Oh, I'm not so sure. Hengest's brother has been dead a year, and yet he still hasn't chosen a co-ruler. Why not Oisc?'

'Are you serious? He's not half the man Horsa was.'

'Funny you should say that. He seems to like you.'

'So?'

'So you'll be all right when Hengest dies. I, on the other hand—'

'I know, I know. But it won't come to that, Guthlaf. You know what happens to young men who love war.'

'The same happens to old men who don't. Just look at Vortigern.'

Eaha turned his face to the west, as though he really were looking at Vortigern.

'We've had no news. He could still be alive for all we know.'

'Perhaps,' said Guthlaf, almost ruefully. 'But even if he did manage to get out of that fort alive, he's lost without those soldiers in the Londinium garrison. We'll probably see those soldiers before he does.'

XXIII

Looking at the six little boys who had found their way back to what was left of the Theodosian College, Severus wished he could offer them some words of comfort.

They sat cross-legged on the grass, as still and quiet as the corpses still scattered around them. Glivis's soldiers tried their best to be gentle with the children, but of course the last thing they wanted to see now were more men with swords. Severus understood how they felt. He remembered seeing scenes like this when he was a small boy, in that winter when the Rhene froze over and the barbarian tribes stampeded into Gallia. It was as though the years between then and now had never happened.

'I think we've done all we can here,' said Glivis, circling the boys on his horse. 'Have you got everything you need, Severus?'

'I think so. We'll take these boys back to Venta Silurum, I suppose, and get word to their parents.'

'What about the dead boys' parents?'

'An impossible task, I'm afraid. We don't know who they were. If there was a register of students, it's been burnt up with the school. I don't want to ask these little ones to start identifying corpses. They've been through enough today.'

'Understood. And Vortigern?'

'I don't know. There's no way to be sure unless he turns up alive somewhere else. If he's still inside the villa there'll be nothing left of his body after the fire dies out. Personally, I think he must be dead.'

'Agreed. And if more survivors return from the forest?'

'We will wait and see,' said Bishop Germanus, who had ridden up without being heard by the other two. 'Iniris's men are setting up camp where we stopped. I think we'd better stay here overnight and then search the forest in the morning. God willing, we'll find more survivors and learn something about what happened here. What's your opinion, Glivis? Was it the Scoti?'

'Yes,' said Glivis. 'Without a shadow of a doubt.'

'Benli's men?'

'No, this doesn't look like him. The men who did this came over from Hibernia itself, I'd bet my life on it. I haven't seen anything like this for years.'

Bishop Germanus dismounted and went to where the little boys sat. He crouched down next to one of them and smiled broadly.

'Hello there,' he said in Britannic. 'My name is Bishop Germanus, and these are my friends. We're here to help you. What's your name?'

‘Iosephus Antorius, sir,’ said the boy shyly, hiding his face behind his hands. He was about five years old.

‘Is that the name the college gave you?’

The boy nodded.

‘Well, now,’ said the bishop, beaming, ‘I am your friend, so you can tell me your real name, can’t you?’

‘My name’s Cunorix, sir.’

‘I’m pleased to meet you, Cunorix, and there’s no need to call me “sir” now that we’re friends. You may call me Bishop Germanus. I am from Gallia. Where do you come from, Cunorix?’

‘Venedotia.’

‘Oh yes? I’ve never been to Venedotia, but I hear it’s very pretty there. What about the rest of you? What are your names, and where do you all come from?’

The others gave their names and birthplaces in sing-song voices.

‘Well, I’m very pleased to meet you all. Now, you’re all safe and sound with us, and no one will hurt you. You’re all going to come with me to my camp in a little while, and there you’ll be given supper and a bed each in a nice warm tent. You’ve already been very helpful in telling us about the bad men who came here today. Now, do you see the nice man on the horse there? His name is Glivis. Now, what I want you to do is to think of all the boys who aren’t here with us right now, and then I want you to tell Glivis their names, and where their families live. Try to remember as many as you can. Do you think you can do that for me?’

‘Yes, Bishop Germanus,’ the boys chorused.

The children crowded around Glivis, who pulled out a stylus and tablet from his saddlebag. Bishop Germanus stood and turned to Severus.

‘Have the men finished the survey?’

‘Yes, Lord Father,’ said Severus. ‘The college and the villa have been examined as closely as possible.’

‘Good. Now, read the report to me, if you would.’

‘Certainly.’ Severus held up the wax tablet he had been writing upon and cleared his throat. ‘It’s rather inelegantly written, but here it is: “Stockade not breached, probable surprise assault on entrance. Probable small to medium raiding party. Bodies found near entrance. Probably no organised defence. Halls and refectories burned, many bodies inside: men and children, death by burning. Chapels and oratories looted and partially burned, more bodies inside: men and children, death by wounding. Kennels and stables burned, more bodies inside: men, children and animals, death by burning. Bodies found on meadow north of college grounds: mostly children, death by arrow wounds from behind. Villa north of college site, belonging to Magonius family, mostly destroyed. Courtyard and cloister, more bodies found: children. Main hall, fire ongoing, many dead. Some bodies recovered, roof since collapsed burying remainder. Magonius family missing, presumed dead. Vitalinus and accomplices missing, presumed dead. Six survivors, children, returned from hiding in woods. Man of Vitalinus’s description seen entering villa with Saturninus, who alerted us to Vitalinus’s presence. Saturninus presumed dead. Descriptions identify raiders as tribesmen of northern Hibernia, most likely Ulidi or Dalriadi...” and that’s all we have so far, Lord Father.’

‘Presumed dead?’ said Bishop Germanus, climbing back into the saddle. ‘No. Vitalinus

has a long history of surviving hopeless situations and coming back stronger. Until I see his body, he is presumed alive. It won't be worth picking through the ashes of the villa. All we can do for now is search the woods in the morning. If we find nothing, we'll turn our attentions to our forthcoming meeting with Benli.'

'We're *meeting* Benli?'

'Yes. It's all arranged; I'll explain nearer the time. It is extremely important, however, that we remain alert. Men like Vitalinus do not simply disappear. If he manages to find somewhere to hide, then that means someone must be sheltering him. So, we will need to—'

'Find out who's still loyal to him,' Glivis interrupted. 'And wipe them out.'

Bishop Germanus glanced over to where the magistrate sat on his horse amidst the children. There was the faintest hint of scorn in the bishop's eyes, and Glivis's face reddened.

'We'll speak to them,' said the bishop. 'We'll make it clear that harbouring or aiding the tyrant is an act against the authority of the Holy Catholic Church.' He turned back to Severus and spoke quietly. 'He's too impatient, that one. He speaks more than he thinks.'

'He's just eager to please, Lord Father,' said Severus. 'I think he has hopes of leading the campaign after we go back to Gallia.'

'They all do, those little kings back at Venta Silurum. I fear that as soon as we're gone they'll fall to squabbling amongst themselves, and all our good work will be undone. There needs to be a clear leader whose word is law for all of them, the kind that the troops will follow to hell and back. Glivis is too dull, Iniris is too sly, Anblaud is too... too affable. Now, Britu was a leader that the people could get behind, but he had bad luck. Elaphius might have taken his place, but now he's dead too. The citizens need a leader, and soon.'

'But whom?'

Germanus shook his head.

'We can only hope the Lord will provide such a man. Go and doublecheck those names with Glivis, would you, my boy. I've a feeling he's not much of a scribe.'

That evening Severus wrote up letters to send to the parents of the dead boys. The list that he and Glivis had drafted contained less than twenty names, since the survivors could only remember the names and birthplaces of the boys they played with most often. The overwhelming majority of the dead would remain nameless and unreported until news of the massacre reached their parents by some other means.

In the morning the soldiers searched the woods as far as the road but they found no trace of Vortigern. No more survivors turned up. There was nothing for it but to go back to Venta Silurum.

They went back the way they had come, dropping off Glivis's troops at Tamium and then passing through Isca. The feral children of Legion City did not stir from their lairs, and the bishop's party came out of the eastern gate without incident. In the afternoon they reached Venta Silurum again and found the gates locked. A soldier on the ramparts waved down to Bishop Germanus.

'King Iniris is coming now, Lord Father. We saw you coming.'

The bishop shouted up to him. 'But why are the gates locked? Has something happened?'

'Saxons, Lord Father! There's an army of them setting up camp over by the coast.' The soldier pointed south to where some black dots that might have been people were setting up some white smudges that might have been tents. 'They sent scouts over to the gate, but we

drove them back.'

The bishop groaned inwardly as he now noticed the corpses seventy yards or so out from the town gates, riddled with arrows.

'They won't attack. I knew they were coming, but I'd forgotten to mention it to your king.'

'Get out of the way!' Iniris appeared on the ramparts behind the soldier. 'Open the gate, quickly. Welcome back, Lord Father. I'm so glad to see that you're alive. We were beginning to get worried when we didn't hear from you last night, especially when those heathens appeared over there.'

'They are friends, Iniris,' said Germanus.

'Friends?'

'Yes, I'd forgotten to tell you. That is Cuthwulf the Saxon, and his men. They have come to join forces with us against Hengest.'

The bishop had to repeat himself twice before Iniris could accept that he had heard him correctly.

'Saxons, joining up with us? But... it's our aim to drive the Saxons out of the country!'

'No, Iniris, it is not. Your aim is to drive paganism and heresy out of the country. I intend to baptise these men myself, and then they will be good pious Christians, just as you are. Also, they may be able to tell us what has happened to the boy Pascent. These Saxons are settled in the area around Verulamium. They may have heard something.'

There was a clang of iron and the gate swung inwards.

'I should have remembered to tell you, Iniris,' the bishop continued, staying where he was for the moment. 'I apologise.'

'I knew,' Glivis piped up idiotically.

'But...' Iniris's voice grew high and whining. 'But they can't come in here! They can't come inside the city!'

'Why not?' said the bishop.

'Because there'll be a riot! The people here hate the Saxons!'

'Very well, I'll go to them. And if I bring back only their leader into the city?'

Iniris inflated his cheeks and blew out noisily.

'One Saxon might be all right, as long as he's with you. But a whole army of them—'

'Calm yourself, Iniris,' said the bishop. 'I'll be back in a little while. Glivis, you take the men and the children inside. Severus, you come with me.'

XXIV

Trygils was not getting any better.

The position in which he had been travelling (strapped face-up to the back of his horse) did not go at all well with the rigor mortis that had set in over the last day. When they took him down for the evening, they found that his limbs had gone rigid and were bent back away from his body. They had dangled like that during the journey and had set fast. The men could not bend him back into shape. Some opportunistic bird must have swooped down on him when no one was looking, because his right eye and part of his tongue were gone.

The men took him to his tent. In the end they had to leave him resting on his hands and feet, with his body arched backwards over the ground in a way that made him look like a large footstool. There was nothing for it but to wait until the stiffness subsided.

They had made their camp a little way outside Venta Silurum, halfway between the locked gates and the sea. The men Cuthwulf had sent ahead with Eoppa had not been well received. Before the priest could get a word of greeting or introduction out to the sentries, a volley of arrows came down from the ramparts, killing four of them.

Eoppa had hurried back with the others, and now there was an uproar in the camp. Many of Cuthwulf's thanes wanted to storm the town and leave none alive. Cuthwulf liked the idea at first, but Eoppa managed to talk him down. Once he was decided against it, none of the thanes dared contradict him. They would wait for Bishop Germanus to come to them.

No one had yet explained the connection between Cuthwulf and the bishop to Pascent, and he wasn't sure he wanted to know. Whatever it was, nothing good could come of it. But he was glad to have been brought to Venta Silurum. His nieces lived here, and he hadn't seen them for a long time. Their mother had always been fond of Pascent. Maybe she would be able to get him out of the terrible mess he was in.

People from the outlying farms had sought refuge inside the town walls when they saw Cuthwulf's men approaching. In truth, they were in no danger. Letting themselves be seen was an explicit act of peace from Cuthwulf's men, since stealth was their favourite weapon.

They had marched, all two hundred of them, across the breadth of the country without once being challenged. They had gone through the dark forests, which were like a second home to them, and which most citizens avoided as much as possible. Pascent remembered again how the slave woman at Elaphius's house had made such a fuss about the forest spirits. Cuthwulf's men did not fear them. If some phantom had floated out from the trees, they would have probably thrown their spears at it.

The Saxons were fundamentally different from the Britons, Pascent thought. They were not even all that similar to the Jutes, though the two tribes were always being confused with

each other. The Jutes were quiet and melancholic, slow to anger but implacable past a certain point. The Saxons were just the opposite. They seemed to lose their tempers with one another every few hours, often coming to blows, only to forget all about it and become the firmest of friends as soon as they were out of breath. They talked loudly, emphatically and unceasingly. Every statement was accompanied by an oath, even if it was demonstrably false.

‘You pack it in, or by Thunor, I’ll smash your face for you!’

‘On the grave of Esla Gewissing, I never even looked at your sister!’

‘Upon the heads of my sons, there was a bear behind those trees. I saw it with my own eyes.’

‘Woden’s beard, this beer is rank stuff.’

They never swore in Christ’s name, though some of them professed to be Christians in imitation of their king. They dared not upset an unfamiliar god. It was remarkable how suddenly they became quiet before dinnertimes, when Eoppa would say a little prayer over whatever they had caught and cooked.

That same quiet fell over them when they saw two robed and tonsured figures approaching the camp from the direction of the town. One was a tall and striking old man with dark eyes. The other had no distinguishing features whatsoever. The Saxons all got to their feet as they approached, making sure their knives were sheathed and their moustaches free of crumbs. The newcomers needed no introduction.

Eoppa went out to meet the two men and knelt before them.

‘Welcome, my lords.’

‘Thank you, Eoppa,’ said Bishop Germanus, patting the priest on the shoulder. ‘It’s good to see you again, my child. How have things been? Any news of Vitalinus’s son?’

‘Yes indeed, Venerable Father,’ said Eoppa, standing again. ‘Things have taken rather an odd turn. Cuthwulf has the boy.’ The bishop looked at him quizzically, and he continued. ‘The boy fled from Elaphius’s house when the soldiers from Verulamium came to collect him. It seems Cuthwulf had anticipated something like this, and had sent men to intercept him.’

‘How strange,’ said Bishop Germanus. ‘And unnecessary. When the men from Verulamium came to me empty-handed, we feared the boy was dead. Why would Cuthwulf do such a thing?’

Eoppa hesitated.

‘It’s a rather prickly situation, Lord Father. Cuthwulf feared the boy might seek vengeance on him one day, so he decided to... well, to capture him. He has adopted Pascent as his son.’

‘Adopted? What madness is this?’

‘Cuthwulf’s madness, Lord Father, and it’s so very typical of him. I’m afraid it’s quite serious. Pascent was forced to swear a solemn oath to Cuthwulf, a Christian oath. His soul is bound to it. If he had not done so, Cuthwulf certainly would have murdered him.’

The bishop’s brows knitted.

‘I see. Do you know, Eoppa, I’ve had just about enough of this little king. I can forgive his staggering incompetence, but this is something else. Where is he?’

‘He’s in his tent, Lord Father. Come, I’ll introduce you both to the men.’

Eoppa led Severus and Bishop Germanus into the camp where the Saxons stood waiting.

At their approach the men all knelt, just as they had seen Eoppa do it. Bishop Germanus stood in their midst with his hand raised in benediction, every inch a living saint.

‘Men,’ said Eoppa in the Saxon tongue, ‘I present to you Germanus, Bishop of Altisiodorum, and his companion Severus. They are Christ’s messengers. Through these men you will be saved.’

The men shouted their greetings.

Eoppa beckoned to Pascent, who had been watching the scene from the campfire. The boy approached.

‘My lords, I present to you Lucius Vitalinus Pascentius.’

Bishop Germanus smiled at Pascent, who found that he was not afraid.

‘My dear boy, I thank the Lord that I find you here safe and sound. I hear you have had some trouble with the Saxons. Well, you needn’t worry any more. You are in my care now. We will find a way to get you out of this Saxon’s trap, I promise.’

Cuthwulf came out of his tent. He knelt before the bishop and then slowly eased himself back up.

‘My most noble teacher and friend Germanus,’ he said, while Eoppa translated. ‘You must know that I am very happy to be seeing you again, and that I am very honoured to have you in my camp. But not all of us are here now. Your friends in the town were not pleased to see us, and they have killed some of my men.’

‘Yes,’ said Bishop Germanus. ‘I’m afraid there was some misunderstanding there. Cuthwulf, I would like you to accompany us into the town, with Eoppa and the boy. There is much to discuss.’

‘As you wish,’ said Cuthwulf. ‘But first I must show you something.’

They all followed Cuthwulf into the tent that was pitched next to his own. It was Trygils’s tent. Upon seeing the body Severus turned very pale and hurried back out again, but Bishop Germanus did not lose his composure for even a moment.

‘What is this, Cuthwulf?’

‘This is my son. He led the charge at the fort, where the elders of the *waelisc* met their deaths. One of the elders escaped with Vortigern, and it was he who killed my son. Trygils will be avenged. But first I must ask that you, friend Germanus, bring him back to life.’

‘Is he serious?’ said the bishop to Eoppa. ‘He wants me to bring this *thing* back to life?’

‘I had meant to tell you, Lord Father,’ said the priest. ‘Cuthwulf has misunderstood much of what he has learnt. He said he would withdraw his men from your service if you wouldn’t do it.’

‘You’re right, Eoppa; he has misunderstood a great deal. I wonder if we will ever be able to correct him. Tell him to put the body on a horse, and to cover it with a blanket or something. We’ll take it inside the town with us if that will keep him quiet for now.’

A short while later they were at the gatehouse. The sentries let them in, and they made for the town square. The people in the streets crossed themselves as they stared at the dirty, moustachioed Saxon, and at the pale hands and feet that dangled from under the blanket on the horse’s back. Iniris stood waiting for them at the doors to the basilica. He could not keep the loathing out of his eyes when he saw Cuthwulf. Then his eyes drifted down and settled upon Pascent.

‘Who’s this?’

‘This is Pascent,’ said Bishop Germanus. ‘Your wife’s uncle.’

‘His what?’ said the boy. ‘You don’t mean he’s married to—’

‘To your niece, Matruna,’ said Bishop Germanus, turning his reassuring smile on Pascent again. ‘Allow me to introduce Iniris, the new magistrate—no, forgive me—the new *King* of Venta Silurum.’

Pascent looked up at the pink-cheeked figure in the doorway, who offered him his hand.

‘I’m glad to finally meet you,’ said this strangest of strangers, who had proclaimed himself king of a small provincial town, and had taken an eleven-year-old girl as his wife.

Pascent was sure he’d never met a more disgusting person in his life, but he was still young yet. He took Iniris’s hand and shook it.

‘How do you do, my lord.’

XXV

Pascent had held onto fond memories of Rosula, his sister-in-law. She had doted on him when he was very small, no doubt in part because her marriage to Britu had yielded only daughters. Whenever he visited, Rosula would always pick him up and smother him with kisses as soon as he got through the door. She suddenly stopped doing this when he was about eight. No doubt she was conscious of the standoffish pride of little boys, but Pascent secretly missed it.

Every summer, Pascent and his father used to visit Venta Silurum and stay there for a week or two. The visit would nearly always end with a falling-out between his father and Britu. After leaving Britu's house, they usually went to see Pascent's other brother, Catigern. There the rigmarole was repeated. Barbed comments around the dinner table, and a shouting match before bedtime. Father and son would take turns to harangue each other before exhaustion and embarrassment made friends of them again. Pascent was too young to understand why at the time. Now he knew they had been quarrelling about his mother.

Two years had passed since that last visit, the big falling-out that had changed everything for good. This time Britu and Catigern were both there. They bundled Pascent off with Rosula and the girls, but he could hear them shouting at each other from the other end of the house, long into the night. Pascent and his father left the next morning without saying goodbye to anyone. Soon afterwards, Britu and Catigern marched their troops east and invaded Cantia.

Fittingly enough, Pascent had once again been bundled off with Rosula and the girls while the men were having important words with one another. It had been redecorated since the last time he was here. The cracks in the walls that he remembered tracing with his eyes in idle hours had been plastered over. The old familiar mixed scents of wood, leather and damp were gone, buried under the smell of new paint.

Rosula was different too. She had lost weight, and she now wore her hair curled and piled up in the Roman fashion. Her two daughters had grown. Annun was about six now; bigger and more talkative, but essentially still a baby. She fiddled with her mother's beads and hair, and shrieked whenever she felt she was not getting enough attention. Matruna, on the other hand, had become a ghost. She never spoke the whole time Pascent was there, but only stared vacantly, clutching a doll that she had discarded not so long ago as being 'for babies'.

'She's at an awkward age,' said Rosula to Pascent, as though Matruna were not in the room. 'They grow up so suddenly. One day she was playing away in the gardens, as happy as could be, and the next she was like this. I think she's determined to become a lady, don't you, Pascent?'

It looked more to Pascent like she was determined to become a child again, but he kept his mouth shut.

‘She and Iniris make such a lovely couple. It’s too early to expect grandchildren yet, but I do so look forward to it. I suppose I shall have to start looking for a husband for Annun eventually, but I’d like to keep her to myself for a little while longer.’

‘I don’t want to get married,’ Annun whined.

‘Of course you don’t *yet*, my dear.’ Rosula cuddled the child loosely, as though she were afraid of creasing her dress. ‘But just you wait. One day a handsome nobleman will come here to ask for your hand, and you’ll be swept off your feet, just like your sister was.’ She looked at Pascent again. ‘Oh, it’s such a shame Britu couldn’t have lived to see his daughter wed. You look so much like him, Pascent. You do remember your brother, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

Pascent couldn’t understand why she was behaving so strangely, but there were bigger problems, and bigger questions. He felt like he was breaking under the weight of them.

‘Rosula...’

‘Yes my dear?’

‘What’s going on here?’

Tears sprang to his eyes, surprising him as much as it did her. She sat frozen for a moment, and then she let go of Annun and patted him on the head.

‘There, there. Oh, my poor boy, I can’t imagine how hard things have been for you. How frightened you must have been with all those awful Saxons. Oh, Pascent, what can I do to cheer you up?’

He wiped his eyes with the back of his fist.

‘Tell me what’s going on, Rosula. I don’t recognise anything anymore. I don’t recognise my life. My father’s disappeared and everyone wants to kill him. Everyone seems to want something from me, but no one will tell me what it’s all about!’

‘Oh, Pascent...’ Rosula looked at him sadly for a while before she continued. ‘I know it’s hard for you to hear this, but your father needs to be put out of the way. He betrayed our people. He brought those heathens into our beautiful land and put them before his own countrymen.’

‘Of course, I know what you’ll say. You were raised by a Saxon woman, and you loved her. But every loyal citizen in this country might point to one Saxon they know and say, “This, this is a good Saxon. The rest of them are animals, but you can trust this man.” And do you know what would happen if we listened to all of those people, Pascent? For every Briton there would be a dirty, lying, backstabbing Saxon. Such a world wouldn’t be worth living in.’

‘But that was the world your father was trying to create. The heathens kept coming, and breeding, and soon they would have outnumbered the citizens! Your poor brothers were only trying to stop that from happening. They were trying to save us. Now your brothers are gone, but their idea is still alive, and Bishop Germanus is here to help us to realise it.’

Pascent began to cry again. Rosula stroked his hair, and he looked up at her.

‘But the bishop has Saxon friends,’ he said. ‘Cuthwulf is his follower.’

‘Cuthwulf...’ Rosula chewed the name over. ‘Is that the Saxon who came into the town with you?’

‘Yes. Those are his men camped outside the walls.’

‘And if he’s the bishop’s follower, then he’s a Christian?’

‘Yes. Well, in a way.’

Rosula beamed.

‘Well, there you are, you see. That’s entirely different. He’s trying to become a citizen. Why, in a couple of generations his family won’t be Saxons at all. They’ll speak our language, go to our churches and so on. They’ll have forgotten their old ways. That, I can accept. But your father wanted us to welcome in barbarians and to accept them as they are, and to put up with their customs and their gods and their language. Look at yourself, Pascent. Now, I don’t want to scold you, but you look like a little Saxon yourself. When was the last time you had a haircut? Do you want people to take you for a heathen?’

Pascent no longer recognised the woman who was speaking to him. He tried to stop crying, not wanting to show any more weakness in front of this stranger.

‘My mother was a Jute.’

‘Your mother was a citizen of the noblest blood! Pascent, are you not proud of your heritage?’

‘The only mother I ever knew was Hrothwyn, Hengest’s daughter.’

It felt good to say it. He would have liked to sweep out of the room with that as a parting shot, but there was nowhere to go.

‘Oh, Pascent. You’ll never know how sad that made Britu and Catigern; that you never knew your real mother. She was a remarkable woman. But surely you can’t be proud to claim Hengest as your kin? Don’t you realise he’s murdered half the Consilium?’

Pascent’s eyes were dry now, and he felt calmer than he had in a long time. It was easy to despise her now. She was nothing more than a bad actress pretending to be his sister-in-law, wearing her skin like a costume.

‘I’ll tell you what I think about that,’ he said. ‘I think it’s a pack of lies. I think this bishop of yours set up my father and Grandfather Hengest. I think there would have been peace, but your bishop sent Cuthwulf and his Saxons to ambush them. It didn’t work, and now they’re trying to put all the blame on the Jutes as an excuse to start a war. Isn’t that what really happened?’

He watched her face as he said it. She blinked and turned her head away, and a flutter came into her voice when she spoke again.

‘I don’t know where you get these ideas from, Pascent. You’re just a child. You can’t possibly know what you’re saying.’

‘Grandfather Hengest had nothing to do with it, did he? That bishop wanted him and my father dead, but Cuthwulf’s men made a mess of it. Isn’t that what really happened?’

She continued to protest, but he did not want to hear any more. He had come gently to suspect the truth over the last few days, but having it confirmed was like a sudden handful of salt into a wound that had been only slight up until now. Had he been older he might have compared it to a lover’s betrayal, but he had experienced nothing like it before. Everything was new and devastating.

‘All grownups are liars,’ he said to himself. ‘All of them.’

This was a private meeting, too private for Severus to feel altogether safe being in a room with Cuthwulf. There was Eoppa, Iniris and Bishop Germanus, but that was all. They had

told the guards to wait outside. The bishop began by asking Cuthwulf why he had abducted Vortigern's son, and Eoppa translated.

'I have my reasons,' said Cuthwulf, 'and they are good ones, friend Germanus. My hands are stained with the blood of the *waelisc* elders, and also with the blood of the Jutes. Vortigern and Hengest are my mortal enemies. Both remain alive, and both will seek vengeance against the Middle Saxons if they grow strong enough. As long as Pascent is with me they will not dare strike for fear of harming him.

'And should we not manage to kill them, then there may be a chance of being reconciled with both these great leaders and of becoming as brothers once more. They must know that I had my chance to kill Pascent and I did not take it, but instead I brought him safe to the bosom of his family. They must know that Cuthwulf is an honourable man whom they can trust.

'But if we succeed in crushing these tyrants, as we must, then Pascent must not grow to hate Cuthwulf and his men, for he will surely grow into a great warrior like his brothers. He is dangerous to me, and so I bound him to my blood and made him my son. Peace has always been achieved between the children of Woden in this way. I needed another son to carry on my line because I was robbed of my firstborn by the cruel *waelisc*, who struck him down at Ambrosius's fort. And this is why I must speak to you, wise Germanus, because only you can bring my son Trygils back from the land of the dead, so that he can be the King of the Middle Saxons after I am gone.'

There was silence at first, and then a shrill laugh escaped from Severus's mouth before he could stop it. Bishop Germanus showed no surprise at the lunatic's words.

'Where do I begin, Cuthwulf? Need I point out that you have utterly failed in every aspect of the mission entrusted to you? You do realise that, don't you? Vitalinus is still alive. Hengest escaped the fort with nearly all his best men. It would seem your men have little talent for killing! Oh, but I forgot about Elaphius. They did manage to kill him—the one man you were *specifically instructed to spare*.' The bishop smiled sarcastically. 'You do remember Elaphius, don't you? I'm sure the name must stir something in your memory. The magistrate from Verulamium. The man who told us the meeting would be at Ambrosius's fort. The one who was supposed to lead the Consilium after Vitalinus's death. Does he sound familiar?'

Eoppa was sweating as he tried to rephrase this into something more tactful, but the point got across without him. The bishop's tone was that of a man losing patience with a fool. Something had changed in Cuthwulf's face. A presence was beginning to take shape in the vacuum.

'I want my son back,' he said. 'I will continue to fight for you, wise Germanus, only help me. I will succeed next time. I will bring the heads of Vortigern and Hengest to your feet, only help me. Use the power given to you by the Lord Jesus and bring Trygils back to life.'

'Cuthwulf...' The bishop sounded tired now. 'Enough. You will give up your claim over Pascent at once. You will swear on the Holy Book, right here in this basilica, that the child is henceforth released from that travesty of an oath.'

'Only if you will bring Trygils back,' said Cuthwulf after he had heard the translation. 'You must bring him back, or I will go back to my kingdom with Pascent and all my men, and I will be your enemy. You must know that I am serious. I mean to be reunited with my

son.'

'So you shall be.' Bishop Germanus nodded to Iniris, who called for the guards.

The doors along the sides of the room all crashed open at once. Cuthwulf stood very still as the guards flooded in from the outer corridors. They forced him to the ground and held him there. Somewhere a sword hissed out of its sheath.

Severus had promised himself that he would try to witness as much as he could, for the sake of the account he was writing, but this was too much. He fixed his eyes on the far wall and ground his teeth as he heard the parting of flesh and the cracking of bone. Worst of all was the executioner's snorting and panting as he sawed away at Cuthwulf's neck with his sword. Severus covered his ears, but he fell into a panic and began whispering to himself over and over about how much he wished he was back home in Treverorum.

Some time later he found himself riding out of the town at Bishop Germanus's side, with the greater part of Iniris's infantry behind them. Ahead of them a soldier carried Cuthwulf's head on the end of a pike. Severus dared not look at the Saxons in the camp while they quietly examined what was left of their king.

'Cuthwulf is dead,' Bishop Germanus called out to them. 'His faith was weak. If you believe truly in the Lord Jesus Christ and serve Him in your hearts, then you will not share your king's fate. I am Germanus of Altisiodorum, a servant of the Lord. He that believes in the Lord, though he were dead, yet shall he live—and whosoever believes in me will not perish, but will have eternal life.'

Eoppa translated, and Severus saw the Saxons lined up before them. He saw their spears, their matted hair and their bestial faces. There was no sign of defiance. They would follow Bishop Germanus and his god to the death.

The title of Severus's work in progress was *On the Salvation of the Britannic Peoples from the Evils of Heresy and Idolatry, As Achieved by the Most Blessed Germanus, Bishop of Altisiodorum*. He had already decided that he would leave this episode out of it.

XXVI

Progress was still slow, even with the horses. The black gelding was used to pulling heavy loads, but it struggled with Eldol's immense bulk planted in the centre of its back. The others had to keep stopping to let him catch up. Vortigern and Lestin each had a mare to themselves while Calixus and the boy shared a third. They had decided, on Lestin's advice, against taking the old white stallion.

'It's springtime,' he had said. 'Stallions are randy in the springtime. It'd throw you off its back just to get at the mares.'

That was yesterday, and Eldol supposed they must be in Venedotia by now, since he could see mountains in the distance up ahead. Last night they had camped outside the walls of an abandoned town. None of them knew its name, but they could see that its inhabitants had left recently and in great haste. In the morning they rifled the houses for supplies, and came out with some pots and bowls but no food. Then they went north along the coast road through the drizzle and the wind.

The silence was getting to Eldol. He tried to strike up a conversation with Lestin, but he found him uncommunicative. The shared guilt of the horse breeder's murder was festering between them. It could not be helped. Over the past few days they had lived within an arm's length of each other, but for most of that time the front wall of the wagon had marked a boundary between passenger and driver, master and servant, rich and poor. They could never be friends. Eldol did not want to talk to Vortigern. He was afraid of him now, and in any case the old man was far up ahead on his mare, keeping a distance from his followers. He had become a ruler of men again.

Eldol drew level with Calixus and Ambris. The boy was slumped against Calixus's back, sleeping. The monk nodded a greeting to Eldol as he drew near.

'My lord Eldol.'

'Calixus... I was wondering...'

'Yes?'

Eldol found himself tongue-tied. Then the horse breeder's dead face flashed into his mind, and the words began to limp out of him.

'I've... we've been lucky so far, but I know we're in a lot of danger. I know we might not survive this. It's been a long time since I last went to confession, and, well, I don't want to die without confessing all the things I've done. I've done some terrible things over the last few days, you see—'

Calixus interrupted him. 'I am only a brother monk, my lord. I cannot absolve you of your sins.'

‘You can’t?’

‘No. You would need to speak to a priest or a bishop for that. I suppose, since you ask, that you are of the Catholic faith?’

‘Of course. What else would I be?’

‘You might be a Pelagian, for example. There are still plenty of them left.’

‘Ah.’ He remembered what Lestin had told them about the riot in Aquae Sulis, and the question that had been bothering him ever since. ‘I was meaning to ask you about that too. I’ve heard that the Pelagians believe a man can get into heaven just by leading a good life.’

‘That is one of their beliefs.’

‘And can’t we?’

‘Of course not. One must obtain divine grace to enter the kingdom of heaven.’

‘And what is divine grace? Do I have it?’

Calixus looked at him. ‘Are you sure you are a Catholic?’

‘Of course I am! My brother’s the Bishop of Glevum.’

‘And what do you believe?’

‘Well... it’s hard to say exactly. I’ve forgotten a lot of things. I am a Catholic, though, I promise.’

‘I see. Well, as you *ought* to know, we Catholics believe that we are born damned by original sin, and that committing further sin is unavoidable without divine grace. For this reason it is of the utmost importance to baptise infants, since children who die unbaptised cannot get into heaven. The Pelagians reject this doctrine. They profess that a man chooses his own actions and that leading a sinful or sinless life is a matter of choice. So it follows, according to what they preach, that a man might live his whole life without knowing Christ, and if he committed no sin then he would go straight to heaven. They even believe that death itself is a process of nature, and not a consequence of sin!’

Eldol nodded thoughtfully.

‘I’m sorry, Calixus, I didn’t understand any of what you just said.’

But there was no stopping Calixus once he got going.

‘And then even worse than the Pelagians, there are the Arians. The Arians believe that the Son is not of one substance with the Father, but that He was created by Him. Can you imagine that, my lord? The Son created by the Father? Such vile slander!’

‘So you’re saying that Jesus *wasn’t* the son of God?’

‘Of course He was. But the Son has always existed, and always will exist, alongside the Father and the Holy Spirit. Christ is both fully divine and fully human, and He is eternal. The Arians believe that there was a time when the Son did not exist, and there was only the Father.’

‘But how could He be fully divine and fully human at the same time? Wouldn’t He have to be half of one, and half of the other?’

‘No.’

‘I see,’ said Eldol. He did not see. Mathematics were not his strong point. ‘So how could Jesus be the son of God if he has always existed at the same time as God?’

Calixus smiled patiently.

‘God exists as one being in three distinct persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. All are eternal and of one substance. All are God.’

‘So really there are... three Gods?’

‘No, no, *no!*’ the monk exploded. ‘Do you not believe what I am telling you?’

‘I do, Calixus, honestly I do. I just don’t understand it.’

Calixus glowered at him, and he let the matter drop. He was more worried about the fate of his soul than ever. Maybe his brother was right, and he really was an idiot.

The mountains crept closer as they rode on through the day. By the late afternoon they were in their midst, and the road spilled out into a valley of such staggering beauty that Eldol could hardly believe he was still in the same country. The next valley was even more beautiful. Eldol had never really seen mountains before, and he would never have guessed they could grow so high. Some of the peaks were hidden in the clouds, and he wondered if it were possible to reach heaven by climbing them. If so, perhaps he might plead his case directly. Surely this was God’s own land. Surely nothing bad could happen here. Eldol almost forgot about the murder he had committed, and now he dismissed all the stories he had heard about Cunedag. Surely Cunedag must be a good man if he was allowed to live in such a place.

The sun disappeared early in the bowels of the valleys, but the sky remained light for a long time afterwards. It was still only just starting to get dark when they came within sight of a stone fort. There were no outlying villages or farms to be seen there, and it was very quiet.

Vortigern called back to the group.

‘I know where we are. All the forts around here belong to Cunedag’s sons. Lestin, would you go on ahead and introduce us?’

Lestin lit a torch and rode up to the entrance. He banged on the wooden gate and called into the wind.

‘Hello? Is anybody there?’

He knew it was a stupid question. If anyone were there, they would have challenged him long before he reached the gate. He swallowed dryly and knocked again. This time the gate creaked inwards a little. He signalled to the others with his torch, and they all went inside.

The fort was a mausoleum, never planned and never to be finished. Dead soldiers were stacked up on carts ready to be taken outside for burial, most of them livid and bloated. Soldiers who had died more recently lay slumped against walls or face-down in the dirt. The plague must have struck the little fort so swiftly that the survivors of the first wave had died before they could bury their friends. The yellow tinge of their skin did not show in the torchlight, but they had the telltale swellings around their throats, and Lestin recognised the smell from his last few weeks in Venta Belgarum. It was just the way he remembered it.

First it was the animals. Dogs, cats, even donkeys and horses after a while. Lestin remembered seeing them dead in the streets, but he had no idea when it had started, or why. In a big and busy town like Venta Belgarum, things could sometimes go on for a while before people took notice. The slaves out in the fields started getting sick, and then it started to happen inside the town walls. Production in the textile mills ground to a halt. Merchants from out of town were turned away empty-handed. Then people started dropping dead in the streets.

Back then Lestin lived with his family in the west side of town, away from the market square. Usually he had to take his wagon into the town centre, to bring his business to the customers. When the plague hit, they started coming right to his door. A lot of the buyers

were other dog traders from the east side of town, near the river. Their dogs had all died. They were offering Lestin ridiculous sums for his animals. At first he could not believe his luck, but then he realised the danger. He forbade his family to leave the house and he stopped answering the door.

But it was never going to be as easy as that. They ran out of food and water, and Lestin was forced to make dashes to the market about once a week. It was shocking to see how deserted the market square had become. Many had already left town, which was against the law without express permission, but by now the magistrate was dead and the soldiers didn't care. The town was doomed.

Lestin told his wife and the two girls that they were all going to start a new life in Glevum, where the plague had yet to strike. They did not want to leave. This was the only home they had ever known, and they had only been outside the town walls a handful of times. But Lestin saw no sense in sitting at home and waiting to die. He was the man of the house and his decision was final, so they all set off in the wagon for Glevum.

There was a queue of wagons a mile long at the gates when they got there. Few seemed to be getting inside. Wagon after wagon came back past Lestin on the approach to the gates, away from the town, and he saw despair on the drivers' faces. When Lestin and his family reached the front of the queue, they were turned away like all the others.

It was only after they returned home that the girls got sick. They both fell ill on the same day with the same symptoms. First they fell into a feverish lethargy, which did not seem very severe in itself. Then the lumps appeared in their throats and armpits, and two days later they were both dead. Lestin could not find a single priest in the town, and he had to bury them himself in the yard.

By then his wife too was ill. She lay in bed, refusing food and drink, unable to sleep and unable to move. Black sores broke out all over her body, and she slipped into a half-sleep from which she never emerged. She died without too much pain and without having to miss the girls for too long.

Lestin left Venta Belgarum again after that, this time with a few caged dogs instead of his wife and children, wondering how long it would be before he got sick. A few days later he ran into Eldol and Vortigern, but by that time he half-knew that God must have chosen to spare him from the plague. No one could live so close to its victims and survive otherwise. Now, among the numberless dead in the fort, he was not afraid. He only wanted to get away from the place before his grief caught up with him.

They left quickly and kept on riding into the evening, and they set up camp as best they could in the dark. The food from the horse breeder's house was almost gone. In the morning Calixus went foraging, and he made a sort of thin stew out of the wild mushrooms and herbs he found. He had rather exaggerated his skills as a cook.

With stomachs still growling they got back on their horses and rode northwest towards Segontium, where Cunedag made his headquarters. They took some comfort in the knowledge that they were on the last stretch of the journey. Vortigern seemed almost back to his old self. He was talkative again, cheerfully pointing things out to his followers along the way.

'This region has a lot of history,' he said. 'This is where the soldiers raised Magnus Maximus to the purple when I was a child. My first wife was from Venedotia. We came here

together for a little while after Cunedag drove the Scoti out, all those years ago. We didn't stay long, but those were good times...'

This valley they were riding into made the ones that came before look like mere potholes. The sunlight streaked down across the slopes in a way that made everything look washed-out and unreal, as flat as a painting, except for the shimmering snakes of silver water that wound down into the lake up ahead of them. It tore at Eldol's heart to think that this paradise could exist so near to the hell they had seen the night before.

'...and there were no more raiding fleets from Hibernia after that. They'd learnt their lesson. But Cunedag still had trouble with the settlers, all the Scotic farmers who'd become robbers and cutthroats overnight. The farmers in the valleys tended to side with them, too, because they hated the soldiers more than the Scoti. A band of outlaws can disappear in these valleys like a spider disappears into a crack, only to creep out again as soon as your back is turned. That was a problem for the legions when I was young, because they were trying to tame the land. Venedotia became one of the places where the Magister Militum would send troublesome generals to get rid of them. Even missionaries were frightened to come here. But Cunedag had no interest in taming the land. He took the fight to the insurgents, smoked them out of their holes, taught them what fear really was...'

Vortigern fell silent, and his horse stopped in its tracks. When Eldol drew level with him he saw that his face was bone white.

'My lord? Are you all right?'

'No,' said Vortigern, turning watery, red-rimmed eyes on Eldol. 'No, my boy, I feel ever so strange. I think I—'

His eyes fluttered, and he flopped in the saddle. Eldol caught him by the shoulders, and his own horse snorted and sidestepped away. Vortigern lay stretched between Eldol's grip and his saddle, ready to fall into the road at any moment. Then he began to convulse.

'Lestin!' Eldol shouted. 'Quickly, I need your help!'

Lestin rode up and dismounted beside Eldol, and he caught hold of Vortigern around the waist. They waited for the fit to subside. Then Eldol let go and Lestin lowered the unconscious body onto the ground.

'I think he might be dying,' said Eldol as he got out of the saddle. 'We have to help him. Is it the plague, do you think?'

Lestin felt around Vortigern's throat for swellings, and shook his head.

'No, this doesn't look like plague. Calixus, come and help us!'

Soon the riders were all crowded around the limp form on the road. Vortigern was drifting in and out of consciousness, muttering snatches of nonsense.

'It appears to be a fever of some kind,' said Calixus. 'I do not know how to help him.'

'But you're a monk,' said Eldol. 'Aren't monks supposed to know about medicine?'

'Some do. Some of us see medicine as a presumption. Perhaps it is the Lord's will that this day will be Lord Vortigern's last.' Then he saw the look Eldol was giving him, and he added, 'I will do what I can to make him comfortable. Look, my lord, there is a village up ahead by the lakeside. You and Lestin might seek help over there. Ambris and I will tend to Lord Vortigern.'

Eldol's eyes searched along the shore of the lake, and sure enough he saw the pointed roofs of some huts there.

‘All right. Lestin, you come with me. Quickly, there’s no time to lose.’

Eldol and Lestin got back on their horses and rode on towards the lake. When they were out of sight, Calixus took hold of Vortigern under the arms and dragged him to the roadside, puffing and grumbling to himself. He was sure that seeking help for the old man was a hopeless endeavour. In fact he was counting on it.

While he was out foraging for their breakfast that morning, he had happened upon a crop of a certain plant, called strychnos by those who knew it. Even a single fresh leaf of strychnos could be enough to kill a man.

Trying to slip away before now would have been suicide. On the other hand, every step taken in the fugitives’ company was another step towards death. Vortigern was an acute man. Sooner or later he would have realised who they were, and striking first was their only chance. Calixus only hoped the lifetime of prayer ahead of him would atone for this one desperate crime.

‘Was it you?’ said the boy as Calixus sat down on the grass next to the dying man.

The monk held his gaze for a moment, and then nodded. The boy looked out along the lakeside towards the village.

‘Good.’

‘I think we will be all right from now on, Ambris. We will come out of this safe, God willing.’

The boy shook his head.

‘There’s no coming out of this. There’s nowhere for us to go.’

‘But if Bishop Germanus comes, he will find us and take us back to Venta Silurum.’

‘I won’t feel any safer in Venta Silurum than I do here.’

‘No, nor will I.’

‘It’s my fault,’ said Vortigern in a parched rattle, making them jump. ‘I’m sorry, my boy.’

‘Sorry for what, my lord?’ said Calixus, hoping he would not have to throttle him.

‘For what Hengest did to you. You are still my son, Britu, even after everything. I didn’t want you to die. But you took your men into Cantia, and... I had no choice, you see...’

Vortigern was delirious, but Calixus realised there must be some sense in what he was trying to say. He was trying to confess something.

‘My lord, I am not Britu. I am Calixus, remember? Now, I think you are dying, my lord...’

‘Dying, yes... oh, it kills me to die today...’

‘My lord, I am only a brother monk and I have no power to absolve you of your sins. But if you confess your sins, God will hear you. He may grant you forgiveness if you truly repent.’

Vortigern patted the monk’s wrist fondly.

‘Yes, Britu. I confess. I had a spy among your men, someone close to you. I forget his name. He’s dead now. He... reported to me when... your men were broken up in Cantia, and I... I sent word to Hengest. I told him where you were hiding, and I told him to... to kill you. I’m sorry, my son.’

From behind the mountain ridge a great bank of black cloud overtook the sun and bathed the valley in cold grey shadow. It started to rain.

XXVII

When they were still some way out from the village, Lestin reined his horse in.

‘What’s the matter?’ said Eldol. ‘Has it thrown a shoe?’

Lestin said nothing.

‘Come on, Lestin, we can’t hang about. Vortigern is dying!’

‘Let him die,’ said Lestin quietly. ‘I’ve had enough. To hell with him, and you too.’

Somehow Eldol had known all along that this would happen sooner or later. He rode up close, keeping his right hand tucked under the reins so he could get at his sword quickly if need be.

‘Now, Lestin... I know it’s all been pretty rough on you. It has been for me too, but he’s the head of the Consilium. We’ve got to save him. There’ll be chaos otherwise. Come on, we really don’t have time for this.’

Lestin tugged at the reins, and his horse retreated a little from Eldol.

‘Open your eyes! Does it look like he’s in control of anything, or will be again? Where are his troops, eh? We’ve been following him from one place to the next for nothing at all, and he’s made murderers of us. There was no need for us to kill that man in Bomium. No need at all. We could have walked away, but no, we murdered an innocent man for that old bastard.’

Eldol knew he was right, of course. It made no difference.

‘Lestin, there’s no use in arguing. You’re coming with me to the village.’

Eldol fingered the hilt of his sword and tried to steel himself. But it was no good. He could not stomach another killing. Instead he let go of the hilt and grabbed Lestin by the sleeve of his tunic.

‘Come on!’

He pulled, and as he did so Lestin struck him across the face. It was a good shot. Eldol was stunned, but he kept his grip and both of them tumbled from their horses onto the ground.

The fall knocked the wind out of Eldol. He managed to get to his knees and pulled his fist back to strike Lestin. Then he felt an incredible burst of pain explode in his side and then spread through his guts. He collapsed into the mud, unable to breathe, and he let go. He had never been in so much pain in his life. At first he thought he had been stabbed, but then he saw Lestin’s clenched fists, unstained by blood.

‘Looks like I got you in the right spot this time,’ said Lestin as he got up and dusted himself down. ‘You hit a fellow hard enough in that spot and they can’t do anything, even a bloody great big bastard like you.’

Eldol could not move. It was as though someone had bored a hole right through his body and filled it with burning coals. Lestin drew his sword.

‘I ought to kill you. Do you know how many people died because you turned them away from your town? They were still healthy when they left Venta Belgarum, but you wouldn’t let them in.’

‘Wasn’t me...’ Eldol wheezed. ‘The tribunes made the guards turn them away... I don’t make any decisions. I don’t have any real power. I just... I’m just there to keep the seat warm. That’s what they all say.’

‘Makes sense. Bloody great big halfwit, can’t even read or write. Never had a worry in your life before this week. You don’t know anything about pain.’

‘That’s not true,’ said Eldol, trying unsuccessfully to sit up. ‘I do know pain. It’s not my fault I was born rich.’

‘No, maybe not.’ Lestin paced around him, and then he sheathed his sword. ‘But I’ve got no sympathy for you. You always had a choice. You didn’t have to save that old bastard from the heathens. I’m not going to keep following him around like his bloody dog. You know as well as I do that he’s a dead man. I’m leaving now, and you will too if you’ve got any sense.’

He was right again. It still made no difference.

‘I can’t,’ said Eldol, and he turned his face away so Lestin would not see him cry.

‘I know,’ said Lestin as he disappeared from view. ‘You’re an idiot.’

Eldol heard him get on his horse and ride away. It took a while for him to recover enough to sit up and look around. The gelding was still there. Eventually Eldol managed to get back into the saddle and ride on towards the village.

It was drizzling, and somewhere in the distance lightning flashed, but Eldol heard no thunder yet. He followed the shoreline to where the slopes of the valley were steep and densely wooded, and there he reached the village. It was a scattering of round huts near the water’s edge. A low fence marked a boundary around the settlement. Eldol rode right over it and reined in amidst the huts.

‘Hello?’ he shouted. ‘I need help. Is anybody there?’

He watched the dark empty doorways for a sign of movement, but he saw nothing.

‘Hello? My master is dying. I need help, please! Is anyone there?’

There was a rustling sound. Something dark, blurry and fast struck Eldol above his left eyebrow, splitting the flesh apart. He fell from his horse again. Blood was coursing down the side of his face, and his vision was washed-out and fuzzy. Another rock thudded into the grass next to him, and he curled up into a ball on the ground.

A triumphant shout sounded from somewhere, and Eldol heard several pairs of feet squelching in the wet grass around him. He warily looked up. When his eyes came back into focus he saw that he was surrounded by a group of peasants of the most wretched type, filthy and malnourished. More of them were coming out from the huts. They all seemed to have more or less the same face, regardless of age or sex. The ones closest to him had spears, which were really just long sharpened sticks, pointed at him where he lay. He raised his hand in what he hoped they would recognise as a gesture of surrender.

‘I mean no harm. I’m just a traveller. My master has fallen ill, and I just came here to see if you had a doctor here. I mean you no harm, I promise.’

‘*Heb ef mennin ni druc,*’ said one of the peasants, or at least that was what it sounded like

to Eldol. *'Heb ef eu pen int clav ac ancan iacauir.'*

'Na wir,' said another. *'Roman int.'*

'Boi wir,' said another.

'Ect Roman int, a Roman int caluiduir a traitor. Boi traitor cunedagi.'

'Oia!' said the first, pointing to the sword on Eldol's belt. *'Neur gavas cledif. Boi traitor cunedagi, boi spy cunedagi!'*

A couple of them tore the sword belt from around his waist while the others kicked him from all sides. They were all barefooted, but it was still quite painful. Eldol guarded his head with his arms and curled up his legs to protect his genitals, and his ribs took the brunt of the assault. The villagers tired of it eventually. When he had only to fend off their jeers he tried to reason with them again.

'Please! My master is an old man, and he's ill. He'll reward you if you help him. Please, may I speak to your magistrate or prefect, or whoever your leader is?'

'Heb ef na Roman,' said the first one to the others, apparently giving them the gist of what Eldol had said. *'A heb ef eu pen int goludac.'*

'Ni choilam. Na combrog; Roman int!'

'Heb ef leader... neu via, leader?'

'Leader int eil pen in pritenic. Neu via ir priest?'

'Ir priest int an pen... ir priest it gaffei.'

Some of the villagers grabbed Eldol and dragged him into a sitting position, while the others kept their eyes and their pointed sticks trained on him. They showed not the least bit of fear as their eyes flitted over his cloak and leather boots—symbols of Romanised decadence to them, undoubtedly. They growled things to one another in their strange language, peppered here and there with Britannic words. The few words Eldol thought he recognised were not encouraging. He kept very still.

Eventually another man appeared standing over Eldol. He looked like he had never bathed or changed clothes in his life. He wore a sort of tattered gown, so rotten and covered in patches that Eldol could not tell what it had originally been. His hair was shaved so that the whole front half of his head was bald. The hair at the back of his head grew from a sharp line from ear to ear and hung filthy and matted around his shoulders.

'What brings you here?' he said. 'Quickly, tell me. What business do you have among my people?'

Eldol smiled, perhaps a little too hopefully.

'My name is Eldol, from Glevum. I only came to seek help, sir. My master is ill, and—'

'I know that already. Don't waste my time. What are you and your master doing here? Tell me.'

Eldol was too exhausted to attempt a lie. If these villagers did not kill him today, someone else would before long.

'We're looking for a safe place to hide because people are trying to kill us,' he said. 'We're being hunted. I am a magistrate, and my master is the head of the Consilium.'

The stranger's face showed some sort of reaction, but it was hard to be sure what it was.

'Vortigern himself is here? Lucius Vitalinus, who was Bishop of Londinium? Is that who you mean?'

Eldol nodded weakly. He was sure he had made a terrible mistake. But the stranger now

returned his smile, showing a row of broken teeth.

‘You’re among friends.’

It was the last thing Eldol had expected to hear, and he started laughing uncontrollably. He was aching all over, and his hysterics made it worse until he mercifully ran out of breath.

The stranger turned to the villagers and babbled something to them in their language. Now the spearmen were all bowing their heads respectfully to Eldol, and the one who had seemed to understand some Britannic handed him his sword belt.

‘My name is Maucant,’ said the stranger. ‘I’m a priest. Don’t be afraid, now; the men know you’re not their enemy, and I’ll help your master if I can. Do you see the hill back there?’

Eldol nodded. ‘I came past it on my way here.’

‘My church is there, on the hilltop. Do you have more horses?’

‘We do.’

‘Good, you’ll need them. Bring your master and your horses to the foot of that hill, and I’ll have one of the men meet you there.’

The lightning flashed again, and the thunder sounded almost overhead. An odd look came over Maucant’s face.

‘Do you hear that?’ he said. ‘That’s the wrath of the Lord. You’d better hurry.’

God’s wrath was not far away from Vortigern, who had descended into a limbo of burning skin and aching bones, where he saw everything as if through a warped and fractured glass. He hoped God could read his mind, because he had lost the ability to speak. In the prison that held what remained of his consciousness, buried under the sweats and shivers that crawled over his skin, Vortigern repented every misdeed he could think of. Youthful indiscretions worried him as much as the countless deaths he had caused over the years. It was hard to keep a sense of proportion while he could feel the hellfire lapping at him.

He must be already dead, he thought, because he was not among the living. Britu was sitting by his side. He did not look quite the same as he had when they buried him in Londinium, and his voice was different. Perhaps he had forgiven his father. Perhaps he was here to guide him into the afterlife. But why Britu of all people? Why not Hrothwyn? The one thing that had been a comfort to Vortigern in the last few months was the thought that he might see his young wife again when he died. Perhaps Britu too was damned, and was here to guide him into hell. After all, he had been the cause of Hrothwyn’s death.

Britu had never tried to hide his contempt for his father’s second wife. He loved nothing more than to profess his hatred of the heathens, to declare his intention to see them all driven out of the country. No one ever took him seriously. No one ever thought he would actually gather his men and invade Hengest’s lands, no matter how many times he said he would.

First there were the night attacks on Jutish settlements in Cantia. Then news reached Vortigern that there had been a pitched battle near Durobrovis, with many killed on both sides. Catigern was among the dead. After that there was a brief respite. As soon as Catigern was buried, Britu marched on Rutupis, and hundreds died. Hrothwyn thought it was all because of her. As far as she was concerned, every life lost in Cantia was her fault, and it was too much for her in the end. In January the slaves found her dead in her rooms in Londinium. She had cut her own throat.

The flames were getting closer. Britu's ghost was praying over Vortigern now, and it sounded like his Latin had got better since his death. Perhaps they spoke it all the time in hell. Vortigern tried to focus his attention again on his penitence. It was difficult to concentrate with the fever and the pain.

After Hrothwyn died, Vortigern felt only hatred for his son. All the bloodshed and misery he had seen over the years was nothing next to her death. There was no malice in the woman, as far as he could ever see, none of the cruelty or selfishness he saw in everyone else at Londinium. She had loved life, and she had loved Pascent, and that was all. Vortigern had never tried to kid himself that she loved him. Her father had chosen a husband for her, and she had obeyed as a good daughter should. No, she never loved Vortigern, but she was loyal and kind to him. She never made him feel ridiculous, as a seventy-year-old man married to a slip of a girl might easily feel.

And now she was dead, by her own hand. Some of the braver priests in Londinium had dared tell Vortigern that she was damned to eternal torment. He was tempted to have the priests beheaded, but it would have changed nothing.

Now Britu was praying for him, asking the Lord to receive his soul mercifully. Perhaps he did forgive him. But there were so many other sins to repent. He was a tyrant, a traitor, an apostate. He had trampled over the Britannic people on his way to power and wealth, and that power and wealth could not be defended without bloodshed. He had always tended to shy away from the actual killing, to give free rein to the likes of Cunedag and Hengest. Killing was their business, not his. How many had died in Venedotia alone, in the twenty years since Vortigern sent Cunedag in to drive out the Scoti? Vortigern had always turned a deaf ear to the stories of razed villages and mass hangings. He knew he would have to answer for that. If he could go back and undo it all, he would. Better to have lived a humble and unexamined life than one that had caused so much suffering. He meant it. He was almost certain he meant it.

But then he saw another ghost sitting next to Britu. This was a pale and blond-haired ghost who watched him with the most inexorable hatred in his eyes. Vortigern felt his hopes ebb away, because he knew this ghost would never forgive him.

This was the ghost of Ambrosius.

Ambrosius was a good general, and his troops loved him. After that last battle, when he had forced Vortigern's army into retreat on the plain east of Sorviodunum, he must have thought it was all over. He celebrated victory with his men and sent most of them home to their families. Then on the approach to Sorviodunum he ran into Hengest and his Jutish mercenaries. They chased Ambrosius and his entourage to a hillfort a little way outside of the town. On the second day the mercenaries breached the stockade, and they killed everyone inside.

But that was not the end of the war for Hengest. As soon as the last of the fort's defenders were dead, he marched on the town. The people opened the gates in the hope that surrender would guarantee mercy. Hengest did not burn down a single house in Sorviodunum. That was not his way. Instead he marched every citizen he could catch to the cemeteries outside the town walls and beheaded them one by one. The town itself stood untouched while the dead piled up outside.

With news of what had happened there spreading fast, Ambrosius's allies all surrendered.

It was not enough. They all had to die. Vortigern sent Hengest all around the country, hunting down every member of Ambrosius's family he could find. He slaughtered men, women and children alike.

Vortigern knew his crimes dwarfed anything Britu had done. Seeing Ambrosius's ghost now, he could not ask forgiveness. He hardly dared look at him. The ghost did not speak. He only watched Vortigern as he writhed and shivered with the death that crept through his flesh.

The dying man looked up through the cracked glass haze of his fever at the thunderclouds that flashed and roared with the growing storm. He tried to make out the face of God in the swirling darkness, to sense His love or His wrath. Staring up at the thunderclouds, with the accumulated shame of a lifetime sawing through him, he saw nothing. The sky grew darker and the thunder faded to silence. Even the pain faded away, and Vortigern sank into oblivion.

XXVIII

‘Is he dead yet?’

The boy was crouching by Vortigern, watching him closely. His face was only inches from the old man’s.

‘Come now, Ambris,’ said Calixus. ‘Move away from him.’

‘Why?’

Calixus had no real answer, so he let it drop.

They crouched in the meagre shelter of the branches above, with the two mares tethered nearby, while they waited for Eldol and Lestin to return. The thunder was painfully loud in the valley. Calixus flinched every time the lightning flashed. He hated storms. Right now it was not so much the thunder itself that bothered him, but the idea that it might mask other sounds. At any moment someone might be sneaking up on them, and they would be none the wiser.

There was another flash, and Calixus saw that Vortigern’s eyes were open. His lips were moving but Calixus could not hear the words over the noise of the storm.

‘What did he say, Ambris?’

The boy shook his head. ‘It doesn’t matter. We’ve got a problem.’

‘What do you mean?’

Ambris pointed to a puddle of vomit on the grass next to Vortigern’s head. The shredded leaves of strychnos were visible in the mess, soggy but mostly undigested. In all likelihood the poison had not been in his system long enough to kill him.

‘You’ll have to finish him off,’ the boy said. ‘You’ll have to throttle him.’

‘I will not throttle him.’

‘Why not? You poisoned him.’

‘Ambris!’ It pained him to hear it said out loud like that. ‘No, Ambris, I cannot. It took everything I had even to... we may have been hasty, after all. Remember that we have sent word to the bishop. He may have dispatched men already to come looking for us.’

‘He’ll be looking for Vortigern, not us. We’re not supposed to be here, remember?’

‘But the abbot sent you back here for your own safety.’

‘My safety? Look at where we are, Calixus. We’ve been in danger from the moment we left Armorica.’

‘But his intentions were—’

‘His intentions had nothing to do with the revolt back home. We were safe at the monastery. Open your eyes, for once in your life! Do you really think the abbot sent me here to finish my education?’

After the next crash of thunder they heard hooves on the road. Eldol rode into view, bleeding from a nasty cut above his eyebrow and covered in mud. Lestin was not with him.

‘There’s no time to explain,’ he said, getting down from his horse. ‘I’ve found someone to help us at the village. Quickly.’

He bent to lift Vortigern off the ground and bundled him over the back of one of the mares. Then he took the line that secured the horse to the tree and used it to lash the limp body to the saddle.

‘But where is Lestin?’ said Calixus.

‘He’s gone. It’s just us now. Look, there’s really no time. Just get on your horse and follow me.’

Calixus and Ambris got back on their mare and followed Eldol, who rode in front leading Vortigern’s mare by the reins. Just before the point where the river flowed into the lake, they came alongside a hill, dome-shaped and mostly covered by trees. Eldol reined in.

‘Are you there?’ he shouted.

At once an extraordinarily dirty figure appeared from the trees at the roadside, carrying a long sharpened stick.

‘They... friends-of-you?’ said the newcomer in a lilting, up-and-down accent.

‘Yes,’ said Eldol. ‘They’re harmless, don’t worry. Will you take us to Maucant?’

The newcomer nodded.

‘You follow.’

They followed Eldol’s new acquaintance around the foot of the hill and then into the trees. The track they followed, if it really was a track, was very steep and obscured by undergrowth. They had to go up on foot, leading the horses by the reins. A few times the horses almost lost their footing and fell over the side.

When they emerged from the trees again, they were in a broad and rocky hollow near the summit, dotted with little round huts like the ones Calixus had seen at the side of the lake. More men like their guide stood on the ridges and crags with their makeshift spears, and from behind them a grotesque little figure now rushed forth. He was just as dirty as the others, but he was dressed in a ragged garment something like a priest’s chasuble, and the front half of his head was closely shaved. Calixus felt a thrill of obscure loathing at the sight of him.

‘I’ve brought the horses, Maucant,’ said Eldol to this creature, who hurried past him to where Vortigern lay slumped across his horse’s back.

‘My lord...’ Maucant whispered, lifting Vortigern’s head to examine his face. ‘The devils are conspiring against you again. You’re in a safe place now.’ He turned to Eldol. ‘How long has he been like this?’

‘I... I’m not sure, exactly how long...’

‘Days? Weeks? Tell me.’

‘Oh no, just this afternoon.’

Maucant shouted something to his people in a language Calixus did not recognise. They dispersed and disappeared from view. Then Maucant turned again to Eldol.

‘Follow me. We need to bring him to my church to be healed.’

Maucant led them up around the ridge ahead to the very summit, where his followers stood waiting at the lip of a square pit. The sheer sides of the pit were lined with stones, and a wooden ramp ran down into it. At the far end was what looked like a kind of altar. In front of

the altar was a cauldron suspended over a fire, which kept threatening to go out even in the shelter afforded by the pit. Behind that was a bronze figurine of a man set on a pedestal, too small and too far away to be seen in much detail, but it was perhaps a crude representation of Christ. This architectural marvel, Calixus thought, was the perfect church for such a priest as Maucant.

It was wrong of him to be scornful of these people, he knew. Such humble beginnings had often led to great things. Yet there was something offensive about the squalor here, something impious in Maucant's referring to this hole in the ground as a church. Watching him thud down the ramp and slosh across the mud floor of the pit, Calixus felt the peculiar disgust normally aroused in him by heathens.

'You may not follow me into my church,' Maucant shouted up to the visitors. 'This is not Londinium. This is not a Roman church like the ones you have in your cities. This is a true house of the Lord, where His voice is heard and His will is done. Now, I'm going to ask the Lord to save His servant Vortigern. You won't be standing by my side, and you won't be joining with me in song or prayer like they do in your Roman towns. The only voice the Lord will hear is mine. You—' He pointed to Eldol. 'Take your master down from his horse and make him comfortable on the ground. Then bring your master's horse to the top of the ramp. It must be the same horse that brought him here and no other.'

As Eldol unfastened the old man from the saddle, Calixus whispered to Ambris: 'Have you ever seen anything like this before? Could you have ever imagined such a thing, to call this place a church?'

'More like a fortress,' the boy said.

'What do you mean?'

'Hidden from the road, hard to access, easy to defend. I'd rather stay here.'

'Rather than what?'

But the boy only shrugged.

'Well,' Calixus continued, 'it is hardly surprising that these people are so backward if they isolate themselves like this. What are they hiding from?'

'From Cunedag.'

Dread crept up through Calixus's innards again at the mention of the name.

The thunder crashed, and the rain stepped up its efforts to drench and drown everything in sight. It terrified Calixus to be up on that hilltop with the lightning flashing all around, to be so close to the dark of the lowering sky. He had never felt closer to his doom.

Eldol brought Vortigern's mare to the top of the ramp, where Maucant waited.

'And the payment?' said the priest. Eldol looked nonplussed. 'Payment for the service. You need to give up some money to the Lord if you want Him to heal your master. Quickly.'

Now Eldol left the edge of the pit, and when he returned he was carrying the purse from Vortigern's belt. He tossed the purse to Maucant, who then took the horse by the reins and led it down into his church. Eldol rejoined the others, and Calixus whispered to him out of the corner of his mouth.

'Payment for the service, my lord?'

'They need it more than we do,' said Eldol. 'Anyway, half of the money inside was Lestin's. It's the least he can do, after running off like that.'

'Then he has deserted us, after all?'

Eldol nodded and muttered that he did not want to talk about it. They watched for a while as Maucant prepared to give what passed for a Mass out here in the mountains.

‘Does it not strike you odd, my lord,’ said Calixus, ‘that he will allow a horse into his church, but not other Christians? Why does he not admit us?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘And what does he need the horse for?’

‘I’ve no idea.’

But from the look on his face Calixus could see that Eldol did know. And then, with a sudden lurch in his stomach, he knew too.

Down in the pit, Maucant produced a wooden mask from somewhere and put it over the mare’s head. He was reciting something, still holding the mare by the reins and staring into her eyes, as though it were all meant for her.

‘And the Lord spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying, “When Pharaoh shall speak unto you, saying, show a miracle for you, then thou shalt say unto Aaron, take thy rod, and cast it before Pharaoh, and it shall become a serpent.” And Moses and Aaron went in unto Pharaoh, and they did so as the Lord had commanded, and Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh, and before his servants, and it became a serpent. Then Pharaoh also called the wise men and the sorcerers, and they also did in like manner with their enchantments. For they cast down every man his rod, and they became serpents, but Aaron’s rod swallowed up their rods. And he hardened Pharaoh’s heart, that he hearkened not unto them as the Lord had said.’

Now Maucant tied the mare’s reins to the metal frame that held the cauldron over the fire, and took a long curved knife out from under his robe.

‘I offer this animal’s lifeblood to the Holy Trinity for the sake of our brother Vortigern. I offer this sacrifice in the name of Jesus the Healer, Jesus the Thunderer, and Jesus of the Silver Hand, that our brother Vortigern may live. Holy sky-father, hear my prayer and let not this man die today.’

He jabbed the knife into the side of the mare’s throat and retracted it so quickly that no blood showed on the blade. The mare did not buck or rear up; it only paced on the spot and whinnied as the blood gushed out of its neck. It was getting everywhere. The mare grew weaker until its head drooped and its knees started to buckle. Maucant took it by the mane and guided the stream of blood into the cauldron.

Calixus raced around to the other side of the pit, so dazed with anger and revulsion that he hardly knew where he was. He was looking again at the figurine on the pedestal, and now that he was closer he could see what it really was. It was a representation of a nude man, bearded and with flowing hair, cast in bronze. Grooves here and there suggested musculature and the outline of a penis. In its left hand, and resting against its foot, was a spoked wheel. In its right hand, and poised by the head as if it were a spear to be hurled, was a stylised bolt of lightning.

‘That is not Christ!’ Calixus cried out, and now everyone was looking at him. He looked across the pit at Eldol and the boy for support. Eldol looked extremely tense. The boy just looked embarrassed. Calixus turned to Maucant. ‘This is an abomination! Can you have really conflated Christ with the gods of these savages?’

Maucant let go of the horse. It sank to the ground sideways, seeming to fold over on itself.

‘You’ve got it back to front. I never claimed to have converted these good, pious men that you call savages. They showed me the true face of God. You’re not fit to lick their boots, you hypocrite.’

‘Heretic! Fraud! How can you commit this outrage when you know of the true Christ?’

Maucant put the knife down on the altar and gestured towards the idol, bowing a little as he did so.

‘This is the true Christ. Look upon Him. He is not the dead Hebrew you display in your churches, your shame-trophy. He is as eternal as these rocks, as generous as the earth and as pitiless as fire. He doesn’t listen to the whining of cowards, so afraid of their own appetites that they make eunuchs of themselves. He does not turn the other cheek. He comes not to bring peace, but a sword, and He has freed these people.’

‘But how can you do this? How can you say that you believe this idol to be Christ?’

‘How can you say your Christ is the true one? Do you have any reason to believe he is?’

‘The Scripture! The Gospels!’

‘Someone else’s words.’

‘What?’

‘You’ve been lied to. You only know the Lord through the words of other men. I got the divine Word direct from the source. Jesus Christ Himself spoke to me in all of His three forms, and He told me to watch over these people. He told me, face-to-three-faces on this very hill, to protect them from the lies of the Romans. Now, you lying Roman, how can you tell me that you know the true Christ and I don’t?’

Calixus could find no reply. He knew he must calm down and collect his thoughts, but he was only getting angrier. Then he remembered the story of Christ in the temple with the moneychangers. It was all clear to him now.

He ran down the ramp, and the villagers were already shouting to one another over his head before he reached Maucant. Calixus had never thrown a punch in his life, but he managed to strike his target with his wrists and open hands. After a flurry of blows, Maucant was subdued. Then Calixus reached the pedestal and that obscene idol. It was heavier than it looked, and it only wobbled a little when he pushed at it. By now the villagers had assembled again at the edge of the pit.

‘Calixus, stop!’ Ambris cried out. ‘You’ll be killed!’

Already the villagers were throwing spears, and the first few missed narrowly. Calixus did not notice until one of them opened up a gash on his lower leg, where his habit had ridden up.

‘We’ve got to stop them,’ said the boy, but Eldol grabbed him in his arms to restrain him.

‘There’s nothing we can do, Ambris.’

‘But he’ll be killed!’

Eldol pressed the boy’s face against his chest to stop him seeing any more. The boy stopped struggling and sobbed into the front of Eldol’s tunic.

Calixus had backed away from the idol now, but it was too late.

‘But I am doing this for you!’ he called up to the villagers as their spears arched down through the air and pierced his body. ‘For your salvation!’

Two of the spears impaled him through the belly and pinned him to the floor of the pit. The rest were only sharp enough to gouge ragged and dirty furrows in his flesh before

glancing off. One burst his eye in the socket and then bounced out onto the ground. He passed out from the pain before he bled to death.

Maucant was on his feet shouting and waving to the villagers to stop. He was furious with them. The villagers backed away from the edge of the pit, and Maucant looked up at Eldol with tears in his eyes.

‘It wasn’t my fault! He went too far, you saw him. They were only trying to protect me!’

‘I understand,’ said Eldol wretchedly. The boy was still sobbing into his chest, silently now. ‘May we bury him?’

Maucant blinked, and the tears disappeared. He was completely calm again.

‘In time. This has set me back. I’ll have to remove the body from my church before I can finish the ceremony. The Lord doesn’t welcome the souls of those who oppose him.’

‘I understand. I’ll help you.’

Eldol let go of the boy, but Maucant held up his hand.

‘No, no, you mustn’t enter the church. I’ll remove the body myself. How is my lord Vortigern doing?’

The old man was still very pale, but he was breathing comfortably where he lay.

‘I think he looks a little better.’

‘Then we’ll carry on as soon as we can.’

He took the hem of Calixus’s habit in both hands and, grunting, began to haul the body towards the foot of the ramp. The two spears that had transfixed Calixus to the ground now fell out, but one got caught in the cowl and trailed through the mud after the corpse.

The storm was over. The last thunderclap had sounded just as the mare took its final breath, and now even the rain had stopped.

XXIX

Try as he might, Pascent could not see a great deal of improvement in his situation. He was still a prisoner, only now he was in the custody of someone immeasurably more powerful than Cuthwulf. One had only to look at Rosula's newfound fanaticism to see that.

The bishop's subordinates were a mixed bag. The priest Severus seemed like a decent sort, as far as Pascent could tell without actually having spoken to him. He had the look of a man stumbling around in a nightmare, waiting to wake up in a more reasonable world. Eoppa sometimes had the same look. Severus kept disappearing into his tent to 'work on his notes', as he put it. Last night Pascent had stopped outside his tent and had heard him crying.

Today they were in the heart of Povisia, which had been Catigern's territory before he abandoned it to the Scoti. Cuthwulf's Saxons trailed behind the bishop's entourage on foot, while Glivis's cavalry rode on ahead and at the flanks. Iniris had stayed in Venta Silurum, but now another consiliar had joined them with the troops under his command. His name was Anblaud. Pascent supposed he must have been in on the plot against his father. He was beginning to wonder if anyone had not.

The procession of men and horses went back as far as the eye could see, covering the road and spilling out across the fields at either side. Even so, this was the closest thing Pascent had had to privacy since leaving Venta Silurum. Now he was riding up among the dignitaries at the front, tucked between the bishop and Anblaud, as though he were one of them. It gave him an odd thrill to hear them talking to each other, especially since they did not seem to have noticed he was there.

'That's Viroconium, Lord Father,' said Anblaud, pointing to the sprawling walled town on the far side of the river. 'It used to be Catigern's. It's the only major town in Povisia, so when it fell to the Scoti, the rest soon followed. Benli more or less kept the place as he found it, and I hear Catigern's old team still keeps things running there. Benli doesn't live in Viroconium itself, though. His main headquarters is at a hillfort a little way to the east.'

'But of course, he is not there now,' said the bishop.

'No. Right now we believe he's at another fort, fifty miles or so northwest of here.'

'All these hillforts, eh? The Britons and the Scoti seem to use them a great deal.'

'We always have done, Lord Father, at least in wartime. They're easier to defend than towns. The trouble is, they work just as well for an invader if he can get his men inside one that's not occupied. A direct assault would be pointless, whatever Glivis says. We'd lose half our men, maybe more. But we've got other options. If we can cut Benli off from his water supply for long enough, he'll have to come out.'

'No good. We can't do that.'

Anblaud looked surprised.

‘May I ask why not, Lord Father?’

‘It so happens that Benli has a water supply inside the fort itself. There’s a natural spring near the very summit of the hill.’

‘And may I ask how you know that, Lord Father?’

The bishop gave Anblaud a searching look, as though he were trying to make up his mind about him.

‘I have a friend among Benli’s men. He has been working on my behalf for some time now. If all goes well, Anblaud, we’ll bring Benli out of his fort without a single blow being struck.’

Pascent was concentrating hard on what was being said. He was young and ignorant, he knew, but he felt he had to try to understand what was going on around him. It was important to find another ally among the bishop’s followers. Eoppa was very nice, but he was only a priest. Anblaud, on the other hand, might be a good man to have on his side. He didn’t fawn over the bishop like the others, but spoke to him like a man whose mind was his own. That seemed to put him on the outside of things, and that might be a good place to start.

They had to go off the road after passing Viroconium. The next day they came within sight of their destination, a bare, bleak-looking hill that rose up out of the horizon straight ahead. Pascent could see the ditches and banks cut into the earth around the hilltop, and the roofs of perhaps fifty huts at the summit. When they came around to the west side of the hill, he saw an encampment blocking off the track that ran up to the fort. Hundreds of barbarian warriors were gathered there.

‘Good Lord!’ said Anblaud. ‘Is it an ambush, Lord Father? Are they Hengest’s men?’

Bishop Germanus laughed softly.

‘No. Those men down there follow Sægulf the Angle, and they mean us no harm. We’ll rein in here. This is as good a place as any to set up our own camp.’

The soldiers gathered at the point where the bishop had stopped, and they began to pitch tents and collect firewood. The Saxons set up a separate camp a few hundred yards away, where they would cause no offence.

Anblaud and the bishop disappeared, and Pascent now saw only the foot soldiers hurrying around while their decurions shouted orders at them. When all the tents were up, the camp settled down a little. The men sat down around the fires, getting out the pots and pans they had carried up with them from Ariconium. Every so often, one of Glivis’s horsemen would ride through, aloof and silent. They seemed to look down their noses at the infantry.

No one seemed to be keeping an eye on Pascent. He hadn’t eaten since morning, so he made up his mind to ask at one of the campfires if anything was going spare. At the first one he came, to all the soldiers stopped what they were doing and looked right at him. His stomach shrank. The guards at his father’s house were silent and still, part slave and part statue. It was hard to imagine them ever actually doing anything. These men looked like animals. They were all brawny and sunburnt, loose in their movements and in their talk, with rough faces and cruel eyes.

‘Are you lost?’ one of them said to Pascent. He was not smiling.

‘He looks like a little Saxon,’ said another. ‘Look at his long hair.’

‘He could be one of the Scoti, maybe. Maybe Benli sent him to spy on us.’

‘Well, you know what we do with spies,’ said the first one again, and his eyes narrowed. Pascent held his breath, but then the soldiers all fell about laughing.

‘We’re only messing about,’ said the first one. ‘Don’t worry, little man, you’re safe with us.’

‘You frightened him, you mean bastard,’ said another.

‘Hey, watch your language, you,’ said the first. ‘You weren’t frightened, were you, little man? You knew we was only kidding you, eh?’ Pascent nodded, and forced a smile. ‘Well, what’s your name then?’

‘Pascent.’

‘Eh?’

‘Pascent.’

‘That’s a good name, that is. My name’s Ilvet. This here’s Gavo, Maccis, Ebur, Comux and Docca. You someone’s son, are you?’

‘I’m my lord Anblaud’s son,’ said Pascent, without really knowing why he said it. For a moment he was sure they didn’t believe him, but then they all broke into doting smiles.

‘Then you’re more than welcome here with us, lad,’ said the one called Ebur. ‘We’re all here fighting for your dad, every last one of us. Are you hungry?’

Pascent nodded and stepped into the circle the men had formed around the fire. Ebur took out a jar of oil and poured a little into the shallow pan he held over the fire.

‘This one’ll be yours, lad.’

Pascent looked around at all the other campfires, and then back to Ebur.

‘Are you really all from the garrison at Ariconium, then?’

‘Not us,’ said the one called Comux.

‘We live on the farms outside the town,’ said Gavo. ‘We’re not slaves, though.’

‘No, but we’re all as loyal as slaves to your dad, God bless him,’ said Ilvet. ‘Funny, I never knew the magistrate had a son. How old are you?’

‘Thirteen.’

‘You’ll be old enough to enlist in a year, little man,’ said Ilvet, and the soldiers all laughed again.

‘Not likely,’ said Comux. ‘My lord Anblaud would never let one of his kids join up.’

‘You never know. Doesn’t he look like a soldier to you?’

The men all cheered their assent, and Pascent could not help but grin.

‘I’d like to be a soldier,’ he said.

‘Oh-ho!’ said Ilvet, getting to his feet. ‘Sounds like we’ve got a new recruit, lads. We’d better kit him out, eh?’ He picked up his helmet and placed it on Pascent’s head. Pascent could hardly see out of it, and the nasal bar came down almost to his chin. ‘Perfect fit. Someone pass him a spear!’

Gavo handed his spear to Pascent. He had never held one before. It was heavy, but not as heavy as he had imagined, and he felt the thrill of enjoying something forbidden.

‘He’s a real killer, look at him!’

‘He’ll do his dad proud, I reckon.’

‘Just you wait, lad. One day you’ll have a spear of your own, and a Saxon’s guts to stick it in.’

Pascent laughed, and struck a combative pose. The soldiers cheered again, and he swung

the spear around, swiping clumsily at the air. Then he heard a voice calling from behind him.

‘Pascent! Get away from there!’

He turned around and saw Eoppa running towards him.

‘I’m just talking to the soldiers,’ he said. ‘They said I could enlist next year.’

‘You won’t be enlisting in the infantry, Pascent, believe me.’ Eoppa reached him now and snatched the helmet off his head. ‘Whose is this?’

‘Mine,’ said Ilvet. ‘We were only talking to him. We weren’t doing no harm.’

‘I’m sure,’ said Eoppa as he handed the helmet back to the soldier. ‘Come on, Pascent. Give the spear back and come with me. I’ve been looking for you everywhere.’

‘But I was going to fix him something to eat, ,’ said Ebur, pointing to the sizzling oil in his pan. ‘A piece of bacon and some bread.’

‘The young master will be dining with Bishop Germanus,’ said Eoppa. ‘Good day.’

He took the spear out of Pascent’s hand and thrust the point into the ground so that it stood upright. Then he took Pascent’s arm and led him away from the campfire.

‘Funny accent you’ve got there, priest,’ Ilvet called after him. ‘Very funny. If I didn’t know better, I might say you were a Saxon.’

Eoppa did not react, but Pascent could see that he was seething. It was strange to see the priest behave so aggressively. Everything was different now that Cuthwulf was dead.

Dinner was served in a big white tent in the very centre of the camp. No soldiers were present, only the dignitaries and the slaves who waited on them. Severus was not there. The first course was austere military fare, but it was still better than anything the men outside were eating. Before long the conversation turned to the subject of the barbarian army camped between them and the hill.

‘So...’ said Glivis. ‘I suppose these new Saxons are friends of yours, Lord Father?’

‘The men at the foot of the hill are not Saxons,’ said the bishop. ‘They’re Angles. But in essence you are correct. They’re here to stand with us against Benli.’

‘And I suppose they’re all good Christians, like that mob that followed us up from Venta Silurum?’

Pascent wondered what had got into Glivis. Back at Venta Silurum he had hung on the bishop’s every word, but now he sounded like a child trying to goad a parent into anger. Anblaud looked ill at ease, keeping his eyes on his plate. The bishop was as unruffled as ever.

‘Far from it. Nor are they our followers. The Angles out there are loyal only to their king, and their king is here purely for personal gain.’

‘Then we’re paying them?’ said Anblaud.

‘Not quite. In fact, Benli will be paying them. The Angles have come for the gold he has buried under the huts inside the fort. I hear there’s quite a fortune there.’

‘You don’t mean...’ Anblaud’s face fell. ‘Lord Father, you surely don’t mean the ransoms Benli extorted from all those families?’

‘I do.’

‘But shouldn’t we be trying to recover that money ourselves, to restore it to its rightful owners?’

‘But then how would we pay Sægulf and his men? They have been waiting here for nearly a week now, making sure no one goes in or out, while we gathered our strength. We owe them something for their patience.’

‘Forgive me, Lord Father, but why are we involving ourselves with Sægulf at all? He took part in the massacre at Sorviodunum ten years ago. He’s among our worst enemies.’

The bishop nodded wearily.

‘He ought to be, Anblaud, there’s no doubt about it. For now we must give Benli our full attention. The time to deal with Sægulf will come.’

They had barely begun the second course when they heard some sort of commotion outside. Voices indistinct with excitement came through the wall of the tent. The bishop wiped the corners of his mouth on a napkin and tossed it onto the table.

‘Benli must be here,’ he said, and then he got up and went out of the tent.

Glivis leant across the vacant seat towards Anblaud and spoke through gritted teeth.

‘What have you been saying to him about me?’

Anblaud looked up from his plate.

‘What?’

‘You heard me. I know what you’re up to.’

‘Glivis, what on earth—’

The bishop appeared again at the entrance to the tent.

‘Are you coming or not?’

Outside, the foot soldiers were concentrated at the eastern entrance to the camp, and Glivis’s horsemen were thundering around the perimeter. All eyes were on the newcomers that had appeared near the foot of the hill. They had come down from the fort and passed through the Anglian encampment unopposed. Now they were approaching the Britannic camp.

‘Stand down, men,’ the bishop shouted to the soldiers. ‘It’s all right. Would someone bring me my horse?’

Eoppa tried at first to persuade Pascent to stay in the camp, but then he seemed to realise that this would have meant leaving him with Anblaud’s soldiers again. There was nothing for it but to let him come along.

They all rode down to the bank of the river that separated the two camps, where the newcomers from the fort waited. There were about a hundred Scotie fighting men among them, enough to defend the fort against an assault for weeks, but no real threat on open ground. All were unarmed and on foot, and they had brought their wives and children with them. At their head was a Briton on horseback, no older than twenty-five.

‘Bishop Germanus?’ said the rider.

‘You must be Catell,’ said the bishop. ‘You’re younger than I had expected, and a great deal younger than your predecessor. What happened to him, by the way?’

‘Beheaded, Lord Father. The guards at the fort caught him sneaking back inside after he’d been to see your man in Viroconium. Soon after that, Benli made me his head gatekeeper. It wasn’t the best idea he ever had. I’ve even been out to talk to your barbarians a few times over the past week.’

‘Oh, they’re not *my* barbarians. Don’t make the mistake of trifling with them. Now, young man, I should like to have a word or two with Benli. Did you bring him along?’

‘I most certainly did, Lord Father.’

Catell turned and shouted something in Scotie to the others, and they brought forth a miserable figure with two black eyes. He was in his underclothes, which were spattered with

blood, and his arms were tied behind his back. He walked as if at least one of his legs were broken.

‘Excellent work, Catell,’ said the bishop. ‘Does he speak Britannic or Latin?’

‘Neither. I can translate for you, though, Lord Father.’

‘Excellent.’ Now Bishop Germanus peered at the broken figure as if he could hardly see him, and spoke slowly. ‘I am Germanus, Bishop of Altisiodorum. The people you subjugated have offered their prayers to the one true God, and I have come to deliver them. You are going to die now, Benli. I offer you a chance to atone for your sins and make your peace with the one true God. Will you reject the devils you were raised to worship and accept Jesus Christ as your saviour?’

Catell relayed the question back to Benli. Benli looked at the floor, if indeed he could still see out of the two swollen purple masses around his eyes, and said nothing.

‘I did my best,’ said the bishop, and he turned his face away. ‘He shall be baptised nonetheless. Drown him in the river.’

Catell relayed the instruction to the Scotie warriors, who dragged Benli away. Benli did not cry out or struggle, though he must have understood what was about to happen. Now Pascent realised who Catell was. He had seen him many times in those summers at Catigern’s house in Viroconium, where he had served as a guard. Catell caught him staring.

‘This is Pascent,’ said the bishop. ‘Catigern’s brother.’

Catell smiled and nodded at Pascent.

‘I remember. How do you do, young sir? I’m glad to see you safe and in such good company. I used to serve your brother, you know, before he went to Cantia. He was a good man.’

‘Thank you,’ said Pascent, and then he turned to Eoppa. ‘I’ve had enough. Can we go back to the camp?’

‘Of course,’ said Eoppa, and they both turned their horses around. As they rode away the bishop carried on speaking to Catell in a low voice, but not quite low enough.

‘Let the Angles do what must be done, and I shall do my best to smooth things over elsewhere. You’ve done an excellent job, Catell. You’ll have a bright future ahead of you when you return to Viroconium, I guarantee it...’

And that was as much as Pascent heard before the bishop’s voice faded out of earshot.

On the ride back to the camp, it was Eoppa who broke the silence.

‘You hate your brothers, don’t you, Pascent?’

Pascent nodded, not looking at him.

‘Yes. I’m glad they’re dead.’

‘And what do you think of Bishop Germanus?’

‘He frightens me. And I think he set up my father and Grandfather Hengest.’

‘Yes.’ Eoppa nodded thoughtfully. ‘The bishop is a very wicked man, Pascent. I didn’t realise it until after Cuthwulf was dead. I’ve been stupid. I knew all about his plans, you see. But it’s not just his plans themselves... he relishes what he does. There’s so much cruelty in him. He is not a man of God.’

Pascent was astonished.

‘Then what is he?’

‘A general. A politician, perhaps. But never a man of God. I think his bishop’s robe is just

a disguise he wears to get inside people's doors. I wonder if anyone really knows what he is. But there's nothing we can do about it, of course.'

'So did you know about what happened in the fort?'

'You mean Benli's men rebelling against him? Yes. The bishop tells me more than he would ever tell those little kings who follow him around. For a while now, Catell has been spreading fear among Benli's men on the bishop's behalf. The plan was to make them rebel in order to save themselves and their families. And it worked.'

'But what about the ones who didn't rebel against Benli?'

'Oh, I daresay the mutineers killed them. And their families.'

Pascent asked no more. By now the Anglian warriors were making their ascent of the hill behind them. Half an hour later the entire fort was ablaze.

XXX

Eldol and the boy spent the night in one of the huts on the hilltop, while Maucant looked after Vortigern in another. The villagers had all gone back to their homes by the lakeside. The hut was a lot roomier than it looked from the outside, but there was not a stick of furniture in there, so they slept on the floor. Eldol was sure he could hear things crawling around in the walls.

Vortigern was getting better. After completing his ritual, Maucant butchered the mare and put the meat into the cauldron with the blood to make a sort of stew. It smelt revolting. Maucant spoon-fed the blood stew to Vortigern where he lay, wiping away the maroon streams that ran down his cheeks and turning him onto his side when he needed to vomit. The old man regained consciousness shortly before nightfall. He was able to speak a few words, but what he said was mostly nonsensical. The names of Britu, Hrothwyn and Ambrosius came up again and again. Maucant said it would take days for him to recover fully.

They buried Calixus near the spot where the track came out onto the hilltop. Maucant gave his own version of a funeral service in whatever language it was he spoke to the villagers. Eldol and Ambris were the only ones there who had known Calixus when he was alive, and neither of them found anything meaningful to say. In fact the boy did not say a single word all morning. As soon as the villagers began shovelling the dirt over the corpse, he disappeared back into the hut. Realising that the boy would benefit from some time alone, Eldol stayed at the graveside. Only a couple of the gravediggers actually had spades. The rest kicked the dirt into the grave with their bare feet, and the wind caught up little billows of dust that hung in the air like smoke.

Maucant came over and gave Eldol a pat on the back. Eldol could not help but squirm at his touch.

‘My apologies again. I really am sorry for what happened to your friend. If there’s anything I can do...’

‘Thank you.’

‘Will your son be all right, do you think?’

‘He’s not my son.’

‘No? Vortigern’s son then?’

‘No, he’s an orphan.’

‘Shame. Will he be all right?’

Eldol peered down at Maucant, who had arranged his face into what he perhaps thought was a sympathetic look.

‘It’s hard to say. I don’t know him very well. He was in Calixus’s care before... well,

before we came here.'

'Calixus; that was the monk's name?'

'Yes. The boy's name is Ambris.'

'Ambris?' Maucant raised his eyebrows. 'Anyway, I just wanted to reassure you that I'm doing everything in my power to help your master, and as I said, any friend of his is welcome among us. By the way—' He held something out in his hand to Eldol. 'I think you'd better keep hold of this for now.'

'What is it?'

Eldol took it from him, and he cursed his own stupidity when he saw that it was Vortigern's gold ring.

'It was in your master's purse when you gave it to me. Perhaps you should take better care of it in future. A ruby dragon's head... is it his symbol of office?'

'It might as well be, I suppose. Don't you recognise it?'

'Why should I?'

'They display it all over the country. Anything official, anything to do with the Consilium, has the dragon's head symbol on it.'

Maucant smiled unpleasantly.

'This is Venedotia, my friend. The Consilium has nothing to do with us, for good or ill.'

He turned and shouted something to the men filling in the grave. There was a brief back-and-forth between them, and of course it meant nothing to Eldol.

'What is that language you're speaking to them?' he said. 'Scotic?'

'No, no; it's Britannic, of course.'

'Britannic? But I didn't understand a word of what you just said.'

'Of course not. You're a Roman.'

Eldol looked at Maucant closely to see if he was making fun of him.

'I'm not a bloody Roman! I was born in Glevum. I've lived all my life in this country.'

'Oh, but you *are* a Roman.'

'What are you talking about? I can't even speak Latin.'

'Is that what you think? Your language, the language that you and I are speaking right now, is not Britannic. No, no, no! It's a mongrel language—a bastard language—that your ancestors invented so they could cosy up to their oppressors.'

'Rubbish!'

'Let's see shall we?' Maucant pointed to Eldol's horse, which was tethered to one of the trees by the new grave. 'What do you call that thing over there?'

'Hmm? Oh, I don't know its name. We stole it.'

'I'm not talking about its name! The word, the word! What's the word for that animal in your language?'

Eldol hesitated.

'The word for it? You mean *cabal*?'

'There you are, you see, from the Latin *caballus*. The proper word for it would be *epos*, or *marcos*. Now, what's the word for this here?' He patted his arm.

'*Brech*?'

'Yes, from the Latin *brachium*. The proper word for it—'

'All right, all right. So I don't speak the same language as this lot here, but I don't see

how that makes me a Roman.'

'Well, you are. You've just forgotten you're a Roman, that's all. Think about it. You couldn't live off the earth like these men, could you? You couldn't live through a winter in one of these huts. No, you're civilised. Your father would have called himself a Roman when he was a young man. Your grandfather would never have called himself anything else. But these men here were never civilised. You couldn't build a city in these mountains.' He sighed through his brown teeth. 'Do you see it now? The problem for you is that there's no use in being civilised when there's no civilisation any more.'

'I don't understand.'

'You're living in the ruin of a dead colony, my friend. The Empire is dying too. It has been for years. The cities are crumbling and the people are returning to the land. Fifty years from now there'll be no one like you left, and this country will belong to the countrymen again.'

Eldol knew Maucant was much cleverer than he was, but he could not accept what he was saying. If it was true, then it was an evil truth. How could anyone really wish to see the end of civilisation?

'Well, what about you?' he said. 'You speak my language. You sound like... well, like me. Didn't you live in a town once?'

'I did, yes. I was like you. I had forgotten I was a Roman.'

'And now?'

'Now I've remembered that I am a Briton. Maybe you will too, one day.'

'But civilisation isn't dying.' Eldol spoke slowly and with forced calm. 'It might look like that to you here, so far away from everything, but it's just not true. How long have you been here?'

'I'm not sure. It must be near twenty years.'

'Well, the rest of the country isn't like Venedotia. No one wants things to end up the way you say they will. People are used to the comforts, the conveniences. Clean water, proper roads, warm houses, and just having people around. I mean, I know we haven't got much money coming into the country, but things will pick up again after—'

'Money! Is that your answer? Everything depends on getting help from the Empire, and the Romans have got problems of their own. They don't care about you. That's why they abandoned you all those years ago. I nearly laughed my head off when the legions left and they declared independence in Londinium, like a bunch of jilted lovers. This is no republic. It's just a bunch of old men hiding in old houses, pretending they're still in control. Now look at your town. What can you buy for one miliarensis in Glevum?'

'For just one? I don't know... a tunic. Or some boots, maybe. Or some good wine, if you can find it.'

'And a loaf of bread? How much does that cost?'

'Well, you can't just buy one. You'd get about fifteen or twenty loaves for a silver mill, I think.'

'But who'd buy fifteen loaves of bread at once? How can a poor man get his hands on a loaf of bread?'

Eldol shook his head miserably. He did not feel like talking any more.

It was too soon to check in on Ambris. The only way the poor boy would be able to deal

with what he had witnessed was to press on through the worst of it, like a ship in a storm, until he came out on the other side. He could only do that alone. Eldol instead went to the hut on the other side of the hilltop, near the church, where Vortigern was being nursed back to health.

Right now the old man was in there alone. He lay on what must have been the only real bed on the entire hilltop, half-covered by the sheets. His nakedness was exposed from the waist up and Eldol was shocked by how frail he looked. The flesh was as white and lifeless as chalk. The air was rank with the gutter stench that clings to those who have brushed close against death, and Eldol had to breathe through his mouth to endure it. As he approached he saw the old man's open eyes glisten, and a cracked voice cawed from the bed.

'Pass me some water, would you, my boy.'

An arm rose heavily and pointed to a jug on the floor nearby. Eldol picked it up and pressed the spout to Vortigern's lips. Vortigern guzzled the water noisily, unconcerned by the excess that he slobbered out all over himself. He wiped his chin and managed a smile.

'Thank you. How are you today?'

'Fine, my lord,' said Eldol, sitting down on the edge of the bed. 'Thank you for asking. Are you feeling better?'

'Much, much better. Better than I have for years. My body is weakened, but my mind is renewed in vigour, I think. I believe this sickness may have been put upon me for my own good. A gift from God. I think we've been guided here to this fellow Maucant and his men.'

Eldol paused for a moment, but there was no delicate way to put it.

'Calixus is dead, my lord. Maucant's men killed him.'

'I know. A tragic misunderstanding. But it was his own mistrust that killed him, you know. His own prejudice. I can't imagine what entered his head, Eldol, to make him jump into the pit and start interfering with the statue of their god. Can you imagine if some of the villagers here went into a church in Londinium and did something like that? They'd be dead before the guards got near them, would they not?'

'I suppose so.'

'Yes. The tragedy is that Calixus might have learned something from Maucant if he'd listened. I mean, look at me. I am getting better, and it's all thanks to him.'

Eldol had so far refused to think about whether it really was Maucant's ritual that had saved the old man's life. He had decided that he had no head at all for such questions.

'I suppose so, my lord.'

'And now I realise the folly of throwing myself upon Cunedag's mercy. Hengest betrayed me, Iniris betrayed me, to say nothing of my sons. It makes so much more sense to stay here.'

'Stay here?' Eldol sprang up now, and the old man flinched at his sudden movement. He sat back down again, but he could feel his heart in his throat. 'I can't stay here, my lord. Surely you can't be serious? Please...'

'It won't be forever,' said Vortigern, putting his hand on Eldol's arm. 'Just until we return to a position of strength. The people here have already proven themselves loyal. Who knows what Cunedag would do? He's the bloodiest murderer in the whole country, you know that. Do you think he would hesitate to offer me up to Germanus if he thought it would benefit him? Perhaps, perhaps not. There have been too many risks so far, too many close shaves. Right now the only men I trust in the whole world are you and Maucant.'

‘How long will we stay, my lord? I want to go home.’

‘Not long. We’ll build a fort on this hill. It’s perfect. We’ll have scouts posted to keep an eye out for our enemies, and to seek out our friends. We’ll find out exactly what’s happening in Londinium and who has sided with whom. Germanus cannot stay here forever, and Hengest will not attack this far west. The traitors will soon realise that they want a strong leader again, and that they have been led astray. I will not punish them. For now, my boy, this hill must be our stronghold, our new capital. I’ve discussed everything with Maucant. We will prevail, Eldol, I promise you.’

XXXI

Severus had returned to the fold.

It was apparently impossible to hide one's thoughts from Bishop Germanus, but in his mercy he had forgiven the treason that slumbered like a parasite in Severus's soul. He had explained that when God's work is undertaken in the face of adversity, it can sometimes lack polish. Did not the Israelites make war upon their neighbours in God's name? Did they not slay men, women and children in their thousands for His glory? Yes, the bishop's work was bound to be rough around the edges, since he was working with the crudest of tools and the poorest of materials.

Still, Severus was not getting much sleep. He had hardly written a word since April, when he and the bishop had been staying at Elaphius's house near Verulamium. Since then he had struggled to find a quiet moment to himself, let alone the inspiration to write. Time was running out. Soon he would have to go before the Bishop of Roma himself with the manuscript completed and ready to read. If he did not have something to show by then, it would hardly be worth getting on the ship.

Lately he had taken to reading what he had written over and over again in the hope that it would spark something in him, if only the will to continue. It only made him more aware of the knot tightening in his stomach. He knew the first few pages by heart. He often mouthed the opening sentences to himself at night when he dozed, and by now the words had lost all meaning to him.

'Christ, the son of the living God, of one substance with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever waxes in renown through the testament of sinners brought to the light by His Grace. I, Severus, a poor harvester of rustic idiom, have been charged with committing to script the life of a man still living, whose godly deeds continue to be done even as I write. I labour amongst foundations laid by wiser men than I, that in generations to come men more skilled than I might build a towering edifice upon my rude efforts...'

It went on like that for half a page. Pure formula, with all the piety and false modesty that convention demanded. The dedication underneath at least was sincere:

To his Most Blessed Lordship, whom I revere as an apostle and cherish as a mentor—
LUPUS, Venerable Father, Bishop of Trecassium—from Severus, a sinner.

Bishop Lupus had accompanied Germanus on his first visit to Britannia. It was from him that Severus had heard the details of his subject's early life.

The Blessed Germanus was born in the town of Altisiodorum, to parents of an old and distinguished family. It was marked from the first that he was a child of rare intellect and industry. He was sent to be educated at the celebrated schools of Arelate and Lugudunum, and finally to Roma, where he was instructed in the disciplines of civil law and oratory. After coming of age, he established a formidable reputation at the tribunal in Roma, where he practiced law, and he took to himself a wife from the noblest of families. His renown and influence grew, and in his thirtieth year the Magister Militum decreed his investiture as Dux of the Armorican Tract.

Even at this exalted station he was preeminent, and the duces of other provinces would often come to him for counsel, notwithstanding his youth. But soon he recognised that his glory could grow no greater where he was, and so he abdicated his ducal post and was succeeded in it by the noble Grallonus Magnus.

Thus the Blessed Germanus returned in triumph and with great pomp to Altisiodorum, the city of his birth, and the burgesses therein were prouder of him than of any other yet born among them. So proud were they that, by some marvellous coincidence of purpose, the people amassed as one, and they proceeded upon the offices of the magistrate of that town, and there they demanded a promise that the Blessed Germanus be appointed the next Bishop of Altisiodorum.

Being confronted with such an assemblage, the magistrate made known his assent forthwith. The Blessed Germanus, though astonished by what had befallen him, knew he must abide by the wishes of the people. Bishop Amator, that august and benignant man, duly anointed the Blessed Germanus and made him a priest by his own hand, and named him as his successor. So it was that the Blessed Germanus forwent his wealth, his position and even his lawful wife, and assumed the life of a Man of God. Soon afterwards, the Blessed Amator went to the Lord, and the Blessed Germanus was ordained Bishop of Altisiodorum in the year of the twelfth consulship of the Emperor Caesar Honorius...

In the beginning of this section there were a few omissions but no outright lies. Much of what Severus had written in that last paragraph, however, was completely untrue. Germanus had terrorised the people of Altisiodorum until his behaviour sparked a riot in the town, and he was only ordained to prevent his being murdered. But Severus could not commit the truth to paper. Nowadays people liked their heroes to be perfect. Bishop Germanus's virtues would only speak for him if his crimes were erased.

Some details followed about the asceticism of Germanus, his poverty and modesty, which were of Severus's own invention. Then there was an account of Germanus's and Lupus's journey across the Britannic Sea. A little artistic licence made a minor squall into a full-blown diabolic hurricane, complete with evil spirits trying to destroy the ship.

The vessel being nigh dashed asunder, the Blessed Germanus put himself to prayer, and his endeavours prevailed. The devils of the air and sea were powerless against the will of the Lord, and they vanished into nothingness. The vessel was guided by further prayer to its destination, and all who sailed in her were safely put ashore.

Crowds gathered to meet the two bishops, and at once they put themselves to preaching the Word to all who came. They preached at the crossroads, in the fields and in the lanes, and people came from far and wide to hear. Those of staunch orthodoxy remained resolute, and those who had erred into heresies returned to the fold.

Then a meeting was called for by the prideful and overweening heretics at the shrine of the martyr Albanus, in the town of Verulamium, that they might debate before the people and settle the question of which faith was the true one. The Blessed Germanus met the challenge gladly. The heretic bishops, immodest in their glistening jewels and sumptuous robes, came forth to meet the Man of God, who wore the simple habit of the coenobite. A great host had gathered. The heretics cozened and seduced with artful rhetoric, but even Lucius Vitalinus, who was celebrated in that region as an orator, was no match for the truth imparted by the Blessed Germanus. The people arrayed as one with the Man of God, and the heretics quitted the field.

There was present a man of tribune's rank who then approached the Blessed Germanus, accompanied by his daughter, a child of ten years, who was blind. The Blessed Germanus touched his reliquary to the child's eyes, and to the wonderment of all present she was cured and made whole.

That was the story as Severus had heard it from Bishop Lupus, and he had believed it at the time. He had been hearing such things about Bishop Germanus for years. Nowadays he knew better.

From the outset he had seen people flocking to meet the bishop from miles around, begging to be cured of this, that and the other. The bishop always went through the same pantomime of raising his eyes heavenwards and touching the affected member with his fingertips, and then seizing up as if the heavenly power were flowing through his body. The sufferers went away satisfied every time, hobbling away on their crutches with rapturous smiles. Severus could not understand it. Did they really go to their homes believing that they were no longer lame, leprous, crookbacked or cross-eyed? Would it work on the insane? Could it work on the dead?

They were lining up outside the basilica in Venta Silurum even now, waiting to see the bishop. Inside, the cabal of little kings—Iniris, Glivis, and Anblaud—clustered around the bishop as he settled into the raised seat at the end of the nave. Iniris stood before him, reading out a summary of news from letters that had come from various parts of the country in the last few days.

'There's bad news, I'm afraid. Some of the heathens in the east have risen up and attacked a couple of towns. They seem to have been fairly small-scale raids, but a lot of citizens were killed. There's good news too, though.'

'Oh?' said the bishop, sounding only dimly interested.

'Firstly, Londinium is behind us all the way. They have executed most of Vortigern's staff at the basilica. The Pelagian bishop has fled the town and they've replaced him with a good Catholic. Also, I think we've identified the man who rescued Vortigern at Ambrosius's fort. We think it was the new magistrate in Glevum, a fellow named Eldol. He's supposed to be a bit of a dullard, a bit of a stay-at-home type. The Bishop of Glevum, who's his brother, went down to the fort to look for his body when he heard about the massacre. There was no sign of him. Then this morning we got a report from one of the villages under Glivis's jurisdiction. Some peasants were attacked while apprehending a small group of Saxon raiders. One of the attackers fits Eldol's description: big as a house and ugly as sin. The rest of the report's a little unclear.'

'This Eldol; what is he like as a man?'

‘I got a look at him at Britu’s funeral,’ said Glivis, eager to get a word in. ‘He’s a big fellow all right. He was dressed up like a centurion on parade, all bare arms and brass. I think he’s a bit simple-minded.’

‘His father was a good man,’ said Anblaud. ‘But loyal to Vortigern, unshakably so.’

‘There are a few other things, Lord Father,’ said Iniris. ‘The consiliar Erbin has replied to our letter. He’ll gladly support you with everything he has against Vortigern. He also asks if you’ll support his decision to declare himself King of Dumnonia.’

‘What is Dumnonia?’

‘The southwestern tip of the island. Arable land, mostly. Very good weather.’

‘Well, why not. Tell King Erbin I look forward to meeting him.’

‘Very good... and I’m afraid you have more visitors waiting outside the basilica to see you. Shall I send them away for now, or...?’

‘No, no, send them in. But not all at once this time.’

The guards opened the basilica doors and let in today’s tide of misery and false hope, drop by drop. Bishop Germanus greeted each wretch with a smile and a little small talk before rolling up his sleeves to grapple with the affliction. Severus watched them come and go, and he forgot their faces the moment they went out of the door. The fifteenth or twentieth creature to prostrate himself before the bishop would not have deserved notice if he had not held up his hand to silence the bishop before he could speak. Severus suppressed a giggle at his rudeness.

‘I’ve something to say before you begin, my lord bishop, sir,’ said the visitor. He spoke in mangled vernacular Latin with a strange accent, and Severus struggled to follow what he said. ‘I’ve come to be cured of my ailments, but I must first deliver a message.’

‘Oh?’ said the bishop, as pleasant and welcoming as ever. ‘And who sends the message, my friend?’

‘A little boy, my lord bishop, sir.’

Severus’s laughter tore loose from him, and he pretended to be coughing.

‘A little boy, you say. And where did you meet him?’

‘He was sitting by the side of the road.’

‘And what did he say?’

‘He said...’ The visitor mouthed the words silently to himself, and then spoke aloud. ‘He said that the red dragon seeks shelter among the nine hundred.’

There was silence. Though he understood nothing else, Severus understood that the message pertained to Vortigern. Almost falling over in his haste, Iniris came bounding down the steps towards the visitor.

‘Who was the boy?’ he cried, seizing the man by the arm. ‘Tell me!’

‘I don’t know! Please, my lord, I promise I don’t know!’

‘Tell me!’

The guards were now jangling into position around the terrified man.

‘He was with a priest—no, a monk. The boy had blond hair, and he looked rich. Very clean. The monk was called... it sounded like “clicks”...’

‘Like clicks?’

‘His name, my lord... it was something like... Calixus! That was his name, my lord, sir, I’m sure of it.’

‘And the boy’s name?’

‘That I don’t remember, sir, for the life of me. I promise you I don’t. He was a blond-haired boy, younger than sixteen and older than ten, and his clothes were clean and new. They sounded like they were from somewhere else, though. Not Britannic.’

‘Their accents, do you mean?’

‘Yes, their accents, my lord, yes. They sounded... well, they sounded just like the lord bishop, there, sir.’

Iniris looked at the bishop, but there was no reaction from him.

‘Did you understand the message?’ said Anblaud.

‘No, my lord. They tried to get me to remember a long message at first, but I couldn’t make it stick in my head, so they made me learn that line of poetry about the dragon. A code, they said it was. I don’t remember anything else. I’m sorry, my lord.’

The bishop nodded. Iniris addressed the guards.

‘Take him to the cells.’

‘I’ve done nothing wrong!’ the visitor shouted out as they dragged him away.

Iniris turned his back on him.

‘No, you’ve done very well, my friend,’ he said, and he climbed the steps again to where the bishop sat. ‘We’ll speak to you again very soon. Guards, lock the basilica doors and let no one else in.’

‘I understood the first part of the message,’ the bishop said after the doors clanged shut. ‘But who is Vitalinus going to? Who are the nine hundred?’

‘Cunedag,’ said Glivis and Anblaud together.

Severus knew the name. It had found its way into his book, in the section that dealt with the history of Britannia before Bishop Germanus’s first visit.

Coelius had long watched over the lands between Eboracum and Caledonia, but in the time after his going to the Lord, no man rose to take his place. His successors instead divided his dominion into four territories, and named themselves protectors of those lands. These protectors of the northern regions were Coelius’s two sons, Ceneus and Gorbonianus, his kinsman Quintillianus, and his son-in-law Cunedagius. Cunedagius ruled in the region of the Votodini, between the wall and the highlands.

Cunedag Creiserit—or Cunedag the Burner, or Cunedag of the Nine Hundred Horse—was a nobleman of Roman descent. The region under his protection at that time was small, isolated and very poor. Finding himself at a loose end after the last Pictish incursion had fizzled out, Cunedag had taken to attacking his own villages and farms. Thousands were slaughtered. His peers were understandably outraged, and Vortigern suggested relocating Cunedag to Venedotia where he could do no harm. Everyone liked the idea. Everyone, that is, except the settlers from Hibernia who had made their homes there.

The eldest of Cunedag’s sons took his place in the north, and the others rode with their father to the Venedotian mountains. There they unleashed their fury on the settlers. Two months later the Scoti were all gone, and Cunedag was named Protector of Venedotia. There were occasional rumours about how Cunedag was up to his old tricks again, that he was hunting his countrymen for sport once more. The Consilium did not interfere. As long as the

unpleasantness did not spill out into neighbouring regions, there was no point in rocking the boat.

‘And does he really command nine hundred horse?’ said the bishop when all this had been related to him.

‘Nothing like that many,’ said Anblaud. ‘It’s a sort of poetic exaggeration. He probably commands something like two hundred, and then his sons have their own small cavalry wings in forts dotted around the region.’

‘Then we can easily brush him aside if need be?’

‘No. His men know the land, and that’s their best weapon. Fighting them in Venedotia would be like fighting blindfolded.’

The bishop nodded thoughtfully.

‘I trust your judgement, Anblaud. We’ll just have to exercise a little diplomacy. Iniris, I would like you to dismiss the unfortunates lined up outside for the time being. We set out for Venedotia today.’

XXXII

‘Whether or not we go to war,’ Hengest had said back in Durovernum, ‘I want the boy brought back here safe. Take as many men as you need. Handpick them, if you like. And take Corotic with you; he’ll be able to speak to the *waelisc* whenever you need to question them. Be careful, be discreet, but above all find my grandson.’ Then he had placed one hand on Guthlaf’s shoulder and one on Eaha’s. ‘Don’t come back without him.’

They picked only seventy men, all known personally to them, and set out at first light. On the second evening they came to the damp cinders of Cuthwulf’s little kingdom. There was no sign of life. If Oisc had missed any clues while he was there, the rain and wind had since swept them away with the ashes.

It seemed most likely that Cuthwulf would have gone northwest, away from Hengest’s lands, so that was the direction they took. Corotic soon proved invaluable. At a village half a day’s march from Verulamium, the interpreter went to speak to the peasants. He soon won their confidence, and they told him that they had indeed seen a company of Saxon warriors going west about ten days before. There was no information about Pascent, but it was a good start.

They went on over the unfrequented trails that ran through the forests, and as the sunset faded into twilight they came out into open ground. There they found the remains of many campfires, with animal bones and other leavings strewn about. A couple of hundred men had spent the night there not too long ago. Continuing west, they found another campsite at the end of the fourth day. Guthlaf could see a city he did not recognise up ahead. He had not been this far west since the war against Ambrosius.

‘That’s Glevum,’ Corotic told him. ‘We’d better be extra careful from here on.’

The interpreter went and spoke to the farmers around Glevum, who told him that the magistrate for the town was missing and presumed dead. Since the magistrate’s disappearance, two separate Saxon armies had passed through the area within days of each other. On both occasions, the town’s defences were manned and watches were posted night and day, but the attack never came. The Saxons went on their way without incident.

According to the locals, the Saxons crossed at the ford upriver. Beyond that a few claimed to have seen them take the southwest road towards Venta Silurum. There was no mention of a little boy being with them, but one farmer remembered a gruesome detail about the second lot of Saxons. They had been leading a horse by the reins, and strapped to the horse’s back was the bird-eaten corpse of a young man.

They waited for nightfall before they went on their way. When they came within sight of Venta Silurum, the Jutes spread out to hide themselves wherever they could. They had been

warned about this place. There was not much cover on the eastern approach, so they had to stop a long way back from the extramural sprawl while Corotic went on to the town alone.

They waited a long time. When it started to get dark, Guthlaf and Eaha feared something might have gone wrong. The sun was already setting by the time the interpreter returned. He was very excited, that much was obvious. His tics and spasms were getting the better of him, and he was so out of breath he could hardly speak.

‘I’m sorry it took me so long,’ he said eventually. ‘I wanted to make... excuse me... I just wanted to make sure. There’s so much to tell, you won’t believe it. I even went into the town itself—’

Guthlaf interrupted him. ‘Have they seen Cuthwulf?’

‘Yes. And the boy.’

‘Pascent? Is he alive?’

‘Yes, yes... let me get my breath...’

‘By Thunor, this is wonderful news! You’re certain, Corotic?’

‘My lord, you’re hurting me...’

The ealdorman realised that he was clutching the poor man by the shoulders. Embarrassed, he let go.

‘My apologies. You’re certain he’s alive?’

‘He’s alive. But there’s more to it, a lot more. Please, sit down, would you...’

Corotic told Guthlaf and Eaha all of what he had heard, beginning with the news that Cuthwulf was dead. Beheaded, to be exact. His killer was some sort of holy man whom the peasants called ‘Blessed Garmon’. Cuthwulf went into the town with the holy man, while his men waited outside the walls, and he never came out again. The holy man had then assumed leadership of Cuthwulf’s men and led them north. A young boy was seen riding out with them. Several of the peasants identified this boy as the brother of their deceased leader, King Britu the Blessed.

‘Since he died, they’ve turned him into some kind of local saint,’ Corotic explained. ‘They’ve started calling him Vertamorix; that’s a Britannic word that means “highest king”. Doesn’t seem right, does it?’

‘And Cuthwulf; what was he doing here? And do you have any idea who this holy man is?’

‘No. But they’ve been back here with more soldiers, and they all set out again this afternoon. The rumour is that they’ve been fighting the Scoti up in Povia, but it’s hard to get a clear picture from talking to these farmers. The people in the town wouldn’t say much to me. To tell you the truth, I think I was lucky to get out of there without a beating. I’ll be glad to leave this place behind.’

Guthlaf let out a long contented sigh.

‘Me too, me too. Well, there’s no point in moving on until morning, so we should head back and set up camp in that wood we came past earlier. We’ve had quite a stroke of luck here today, men. I honestly thought we’d never see that boy again when I heard Cuthwulf had taken him. This might just go our way.’

Sitting down on the grass, Eaha took off his boot and tried to shake loose a stone that was inside.

‘I don’t know, Guthlaf,’ he said. ‘This Garmon fellow killed Cuthwulf, right? And then

after that Cuthwulf's men just went along with him like it was the most natural thing in the world. Now, what kind of a man can kill the head of a tribe and shake his men up so badly that they don't even try to avenge him? We don't know who we're tracking here.'

'Maybe Cuthwulf's men had just had enough of him.'

'Maybe. But I would have thought that even the lowest dog among them would balk at standing by while some stranger killed their king. Even if you're right, how are we going to get Pascent away from this Garmon, with all his Saxon thanes and his *waelisc* soldiers as well?'

'I don't know yet. But for now it's enough just to know that the boy's alive. Surely that's something, eh? Come on, let's get started before it gets any darker.'

In the morning they marched north into Povisia. Here the land was too flat and bare for the men to find any cover, so they kept well clear of the villages they passed along the way. There was no need to stop and question the locals in any case, since Blessed Garmon's mongrel army had left behind it a mile-wide wake of ashes, bones and horse dung. An army that size does not cover very much ground in a day. The Jutes found they had to slow down in order to avoid closing the distance.

But two days later the trail abruptly disappeared. They were in the northern part of Povisia now, among the craggy hills that sprang up around the river, at the very spot where they might have expected an army to stop for the night. But there was no camp, nor any other sign that they were on the right track. It was as if a great hand had come out of the clouds and lifted the mongrel army right off the face of the earth. In the circumstances, the Jutes thought it would be safe to allow themselves a campfire.

And in the morning they awoke to see how very wrong they had been.

In the hills overlooking the Jutish camp, Eoppa and Severus were busy helping Bishop Germanus baptise all the Saxons who had marched there with them. There were a lot of them to get through. Warriors in groups of ten or twenty were asked to declare that they renounced 'all the words and works of the Devil, Thunor, Woden and Seaxneat', and then to thrust their heads into the stream that ran down the hillside. They were now officially Christian soldiers.

Catell had come to join them with the mutineers who now served as his personal guard. Over the past week their numbers had been swelled by the men Benli had installed around the region, who had all come to swear their allegiance to Catell. None of them had wanted to try for Benli's place. Better to be baptised here than washed out by the changing tide.

And below them, in the bottom of the valley, the small company of Jutes flocked towards the river. They were little more than dots from up here, but anyone could see from the way they moved that panic had got the better of them. Instead of making a dash for the mouth of the valley behind them, they were lining up along the riverbank.

'There's no way out for them,' said Pascent to no one in particular. Anblaud, armoured and cloaked like a general, caught his eye but said nothing. Then one of the foot soldiers turned around and tipped Pascent a wink.

'That's right, little man. They won't be getting away from us, don't you worry about that!'

They had known they were being followed for a couple of days now. It had not taken long for Glivis's riders to confirm that it was only a small force of less than a hundred men.

Perhaps it was a scouting party that had got separated from the greater part of Hengest's forces. They changed course and led their pursuers north, away from their presumed reinforcements, and when night fell they went up into the hills. The trap was set.

Bishop Germanus rode back and forth before the troops with his cloak thrown back to show the mail armour underneath. He even wore a sword at his side, though it was only for show.

'Soldiers of Christ!' he called out to the men. 'Warriors of the nations—Britannic, Scotie and Saxon—unite under me, your brother in arms and father in God! Join me in battle, my brothers, but first join me in praise.' He took a deep breath and lifted his face to the sky. 'Let us join our voices in praise of the Lord! Alleluia! Alleluia!'

Eoppa and Severus took up the shout, and Anblaud's foot soldiers soon followed.

'Alleluia! Alleluia!'

Glivis, with his brows knitted and his fist clenched against his breastplate, led his horsemen in the chant.

'Alleluia! Alleluia!'

Finally the Saxons and the Scoti, who had not understood a word of the bishop's speech but who knew a war cry when they heard one, joined in as best they could.

'Al-loo-ya! Al-loo-ya!'

The bishop drew his sword and pointed it towards the Jutes at the riverside. The war cry remained high on the air but the syllables dissolved into one wordless roar. They might have been shouting anything. The Saxons and the Scoti banged their spears against their shields, and some of the Ariconium foot soldiers imitated them self-consciously.

Glivis drew his sword and raised it.

'Ride!'

The cavalry wing tore down the hill towards the Jutes, who had huddled together to form a wall with their shields. The horsemen thrust their spears into the mass of bodies and then doubled back, and now the Saxons and Scoti made a rush on foot against the shield wall. The Ariconium soldiers marched close behind them.

Bishop Germanus had gone down to the valley bottom to watch over those who were doing the killing and to direct them where he could. The two priests were nowhere to be seen. Pascent was left alone on the hillside with Anblaud, who still seemed to be avoiding his eye.

After watching him closely over the last few days, Pascent's opinion of Anblaud had changed. The magistrate tried very hard to appear detached from the bishop's great plan, as though he ought not to be lumped in with mere lackeys like Iniris and Glivis. But at least they seemed to believe in what they were doing. Anblaud took pains to look anxious or embarrassed at everything they said, but whenever the bishop opened his mouth he did exactly as he was told. He always fell into line, albeit with the air of a man convinced against his better judgement, a decent man lost in an indecent world. Pascent wondered who he was trying to convince.

'Aren't you going to lead your men into battle, my lord?' Pascent now called out to him.

Anblaud turned towards Pascent, eyes narrowed as if against a bright light.

'They've got officers for that,' he said eventually, looking away again.

'But don't you want to lead them yourself? That's what Glivis is doing. So is Catell.'

'And Iniris is back in Venta Silurum. What do you say about him?'

‘I say he’s a fat slug married to a little girl.’

There was no answer to that, but Pascent was not finished.

‘Why don’t you at least go down and watch the battle, then? Don’t you have the stomach to watch the killing?’ His tone was goading now. He could see that Anblaud’s jaw was clenched, and he felt a delicious thrill from knowing that he was making him angry.

‘I don’t enjoy watching men get killed.’

‘But you wouldn’t mind if it was my father.’

‘That’s... that’s not the same. I wish things could have been different with your father. If there’d been another way, I’d have gone along with it, but—’

‘But still you plotted his death.’

‘Me? I never did.’

‘You were in on it.’

Anblaud laughed bitterly.

‘I can’t deny that, lad. We’re all in on it. Even you are.’

‘No, I’m not!’

‘You are, lad. You’re up here now, with blood on your hands, but you can’t see it. That lot down there; their blood’s on your hands too.’

Pascent peered down towards the valley bottom, where the fighting was all but over. The cavalry wing had smashed the flanks of the shield wall. Already two thirds of the Jutes were dead. Only those in the very middle still held together.

Anblaud continued.

‘Those men dying down there; that’s the price they had to pay for you and me to go on living, lad. We’re all playing the same game. We’re all in on it. And you don’t have the stomach to see it up close, any more than I do.’

He was right, but Pascent couldn’t let him win. He mounted his pony and set off towards the massacre below. Anblaud called after him.

‘Wait! No, don’t go down there, lad...’

Pascent spurred his pony down the hillside, with the noise of the killing growing louder with every step, to where the last of the Jutes were fighting with their backs to the river.

‘Come back, lad! I didn’t mean it!’

He saw faces he recognised in the thick of the slaughter. The ealdorman Guthlaf, the thane Eaha, and old Corotic who used to translate for Grandfather Hengest. The interpreter was unarmed, and the others were protecting him with their last breath, even though he was low-born and of a different race. Pascent remembered now how Eaha used to collect trinkets and toys for him, how he used to ruffle his hair. Still, for some reason he could not bring himself to voice any protest when the Scoti fought their way through to him and slashed open his throat. Guthlaf met the same end a moment later. The interpreter lashed out with his fists, scrawny though he was, and the spearpoints struck him again and again until he fell.

Pascent watched as one of the infantrymen rifled Eaha’s body for valuables and, as an afterthought, spat in his dead, open-mouthed face. He saw this, and he felt nothing.

XXXIII

As the madness grew, it began to grant itself titles.

It was early June now. Eldol had perhaps moved up in the world, but it was a world smaller and meaner than the one he had known before. Vortigern had elevated himself to the unprecedented rank of Rex Brittanorum, and this collection of huts on the hilltop was his capital city. The fact that the villagers' name for the place was Din Pharaon—'the Pharaoh's Stronghold'—only made things worse. Eldol was appointed Consul and Master of Soldiers, while Maucant was styled Greatest Pontifex of All Britannia. It did not seem at all certain that Vortigern had ever really come out of his fever.

But then again, all this had happened quite gradually. As soon as he was well enough to come out of his hut, Vortigern had asked Maucant to introduce him properly to all the villagers. He had seemed sane enough then. He had listened to their stories about the horsemen who came in the night to hunt them, and about how they had all been driven from one valley to the next for years. He heard how, over time, the villagers had found ways to fight back. They could cover surprising distances on foot, unseen and unheard, and their makeshift spears had claimed back more than a few lives in reparation. In one recent ambush they had managed to kill the prefect of the garrison at Segontium. Now Cunedag had abandoned that town for a hillfort many miles further east, but his horsemen still came to hunt the villagers every once in a while.

For years now Maucant had been telling them that one day Vortigern would hear of their plight and come to help them. None of them had the slightest notion that it was Vortigern who had set Cunedag loose in their country to begin with, and he was in no hurry to tell them. Instead he promised them that he would champion their cause. He would adopt their hill as his base of operations. They would build a strong fort, they would arm themselves, and then they would drive Cunedag and his sons out of Venedotia forever.

The summit of the hill was now ringed by a drystone rampart ten feet thick in places, and topped with a palisade of sharp-pointed stakes. The whole thing had taken less than three weeks to build. It was invisible from the road. No intruder could get anywhere near the hill without being seen. Overlooking the track that wound up around the hillside was a sheer rock face, and above that was the thickest part of the rampart, where a watch was always posted. There was no danger of being taken by surprise.

Now the villagers were on the offensive. They hunted for Cunedag's soldiers every other night, and it was amazing how lucrative their raids had been. The sharpened sticks that had hitherto served them as weapons were gone. Every one of them now had a real spear with a properly turned shaft and an iron head. A few even had swords.

They had started to bring back things that Eldol would have never expected them to find this far west. They brought jewellery, silverware, good pottery, fuel, tools, barrels of beer, and on one occasion they even found a little wine. Coins were brought back only once. The villagers bored holes through them and strung them together to make a necklace for their 'pharaoh', as they had begun to call Vortigern. That was how the madness began. No one was very surprised when he finally declared himself King of the Britons. Things had been going that way for a while.

Eldol now bore the lofty title of Master of Soldiers, but it meant nothing to the men under his command. Whenever anything needed doing it invariably fell to Eldol to do it. Today, for instance, he was gathering honey to make mead. The heat was worse than ever. More ramparts were being built outside the walls of the fort. The men would work on them whenever Vortigern or Maucant were around, but if it was only Eldol they just sat around drinking with their shirts off. By now they had even learnt enough Britannic to cheek him.

'You do it, master,' they said to him, sneering. 'We too tired. You get honey, we get you something nice on raid.'

Eldol had no answer to that. He shambled off to the dip in the hilltop where the dead tree stood. The bees lived inside. He remembered how the slave children in Glevum used to collect wild honey, and that smoke was involved somehow, but that was all. He picked up a rock and held it in his fist for a moment, looking at it.

Inside the hive, the queen bee was about to be killed by her workers. She was unspeakably ancient, well over three years old, and she had held on for far longer than she ought to have done. For a while now she had laid only drone eggs. Worse than this, her body had withered to the point where it could no longer produce the secretion that kept the rest of the colony under control. She was done for. They were surrounding her, clustering around her in a great ball, suffocating her.

But then the world shook as something huge and dark smashed into the colony from the outside, tearing through the honeycomb cells and crushing everything in its path. The buzzing of the workers became an uproar. The queen found that she was free. Her would-be murderers poured out of the colony in their dozens. She would not get another chance like this. Out she flew towards the light, until she was hundreds of feet above the ground. She might be useless to the colony, but she would at least find somewhere to die in peace.

Back on the hilltop, Eldol fled from the dead tree while the men fell about laughing. The bees had stung him what seemed like a hundred times at once. He charged through the gate and down the winding track to the valley, until he was sure he could no longer hear them buzzing after him. Then he stopped, dog-tired, reeling at the tiny volcanoes of pain erupting all over his skin. Not knowing what else to do, he got on the floor and rolled around in the undergrowth in the hope that the cool leaves and soil might soothe the stings.

'What are you doing?' said a voice above him.

It was Ambris, shirtless and burnt chestnut brown by the sun, just like the villagers. He must have been out working on the ramparts. The boy seemed to spend more time helping out with the building works than anyone else.

'Nothing,' said Eldol irritably, sitting up. 'What are you doing?'

'Nothing. Why are you rolling around on the ground?'

'Some bees were chasing me.'

‘Oh.’

‘They stung me. Quite a lot.’

The boy helped pull the stingers out of Eldol’s skin. Then he went away, and a few moments later he returned with a handful of leaves.

‘Press these against the stings. Were you trying to get honey?’

‘Yes. For mead.’

‘You don’t like mead.’

‘I know.’

‘What did you use?’

‘A rock.’

‘You’re supposed to use smoke.’ The boy straightened up. ‘Go on up to the house. I’ll bring you something for the pain in a little while.’

Nowadays Eldol and the boy lived in one of the round huts on the hilltop, the second biggest after Maucant’s. They still had no beds, but it was at least dry and shady. The boy still spoke very little, but Eldol felt at ease around him. He was less obviously insane than the rest of them.

Eldol lay in the dark for a while, unable to keep still with the maddening irritation in his skin. He gritted his teeth and swore, which did not help much, and eventually the boy appeared in the doorway with a little pot of something.

‘Keep still.’

He began to daub the cold contents of the pot onto Eldol’s skin.

‘What’s in that stuff?’

‘Some caltha, a little lavandula.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Flowers.’

‘Oh. It smells good.’

‘Is it better?’

‘Much better, thank you.’

Eldol could not think of anything else to say, and the conversation died a quick death like many before it. The boy was such hard work. In all the nights they had lain in the dark, waiting for tiredness to win out over discomfort, they had never had an exchange that lasted more than a minute or two. Eldol still knew next to nothing about him.

‘Why are you so quiet, Ambris?’ he found himself blurting out, and he regretted it at once.

‘Am I?’

‘Well, yes.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Are you homesick? Are you missing Armorica?’

‘No.’

‘You don’t want to go home?’

‘No.’

‘But you don’t want to stay here, of course.’

‘I do.’

‘You... but you can’t possibly like it here!’

The boy paused.

‘I don’t want to leave. Not right now.’

‘But don’t you realise you’re a prisoner?’

‘Of course.’

‘So what would you do if Vortigern said you could leave?’

‘I’d stay.’ The boy tilted his head, as if he were making a considerable mental effort. Finally he elaborated. ‘There’s work to do here. I’ve got to work on the defences.’

‘But why do you care?’

‘I’ve got to work on the defences,’ the boy repeated tonelessly. He edged back to the doorway, and then he was gone.

Maybe Eldol had been wrong all this time. Maybe the boy was even madder than the rest of them.

The next few days were uneventful. The villagers grew peevish and disobedient because they had no mead to drink. Ambris smoked out the bees and collected the honey for them, and they were content again. Eldol remained a joke to them. Their midnight raids continued, and they brought back armfuls of loot to the wooden hall they had built for Vortigern.

As he picked over the spoils, the old man stroked his white beard, now grown shaggy. He had taken to dressing in furs and gold like a barbarian. The string of pierced coins hung around his neck, and nowadays he always wore the dragon’s head ring openly. The effect was startling when that measured and refined voice still came out of his mouth.

‘These are not from Cunedag’s men,’ he said, pointing to the shields and spears laid at his feet. ‘This is infantry equipment.’

‘We kill many Roman,’ said one of the villagers. ‘Not Roman with horse, but still Roman.’

Vortigern picked up one of the round shields, so much bigger than the ones they usually brought back, and turned it over in his hands.

‘Look at it. Do you see? This belonged to an infantryman. Cunedag has no infantry. This is not from Venedotia. Not from one of Cunedag’s men, do you see?’

‘Not Roman?’

‘How many soldiers were there? What did they look like?’

The villagers had no answer, and Vortigern threw the shield back on the ground.

‘Maucant!’

The ragged little priest appeared from out of the black corners of the hut. As time went on, he looked more and more to Eldol like a rat pretending to be a man.

‘The kings from the east must be here.’

‘There are no kings in the east. I am King of the Britons.’

An unaccountable flash of joy moved across Maucant’s face, and was gone again.

‘That you are, my lord, that you are. Then it must be a pretender. Someone who wants to take your place has come out here to challenge you. Could it be someone you know?’

‘Undoubtedly, but I couldn’t guess who. One is much like another... Britu, Hengest, Iniris, Cunedag...’

‘Then we must force him to reveal himself.’

Vortigern turned to the villagers and spoke to them slowly and carefully.

‘Find them again. Take one of them alive. Bring him back here. We will make him talk.’

Do you see?’

It was easier said than done. They restricted their attacks to the mysterious infantrymen, but any that they did not kill always managed to escape. No one knew where they were coming from. After a while the infantrymen stopped turning up, but the cavalrymen did not. Reports came back of horsemen in the area, in greater numbers than before. Some of the sightings were worryingly close to Din Pharaon. They were not Cunedag’s men. They rode bigger horses, and most of them wore heavy armour. Vortigern ordered the villagers not to approach them, and for a while there were no more raids. The horsemen too stopped coming.

Life resumed its routine of squalor and humiliation for Eldol. He would give the men orders and they would ignore him. He would try to make conversation with Ambris and would come away nonplussed. Sometimes he would have one of the villager women in the hut while the boy was out working on the defences. They were filthy creatures, but Eldol was not too proud to enjoy their company. Even Vortigern had chosen a harem of wives from among the villager women.

In what might have been late June or even July, the infantrymen turned up again. The villagers killed three outright. They got hold of the fourth man, and this time they managed to get his hands tied, but still he got away. A group of horsemen appeared on the scene and slaughtered all but two of the villagers. When the two survivors returned to Din Pharaon, they were so shaken that they lost what little Britannic they had.

‘It was just outside the bottom end of the valley,’ Maucant translated for them. ‘By the river... they saw the foot soldiers standing about on the road, looking at—’ Maucant frowned, and then questioned the men further in their own language. They answered, and he continued. ‘They say the soldiers were looking at some writing, my king.’

‘Writing?’ said Vortigern.

‘Yes... some writing on the ground,’ Maucant continued. ‘It was scratched into the dirt by the roadside.’ Vortigern nodded to the men, and they continued their account. ‘By the roadside, then... they came up behind the infantrymen quietly... the enemy didn’t know our men were there until one of them was already dead... killing them is easy, but taking them alive is not. Our men grabbed one of them, the one they didn’t kill, and he was strong... but they tied his hands. Then the riders came, the new kind. Big horses. Long spears. They killed the others.’

‘It is clear to me now,’ the old man interrupted. ‘These horsemen have got nothing to do with Cunedag, nor have the infantrymen. Germanus is here. But what’s all this about writing?’

‘It’s useless to ask them, my lord. None of them can read.’

‘Of course not, but I must see it, Maucant, I must... Eldol!’

Eldol snapped out of the daze he had fallen into.

‘My lord?’

‘I have a mission for my Master of Soldiers. At long last. Tomorrow you and I will go to where the attack took place, first thing in the morning. These two will show us the spot. Pick twenty of your best men for protection.’

Eldol reflected gloomily that they were not his men, and that he had not the faintest idea who the best of them were.

‘Very good, my lord.’

At first light they were out on the road at the entrance to the valley, close to the spot where Vortigern had first fallen ill. There was no sign that a skirmish had taken place the day before. All was peaceful. The only sound was the wind in the trees as the two villagers searched for the spot where they had encountered the infantrymen. A long time passed before they found it and beckoned Vortigern and Eldol over to see. The letters were still very distinct. They looked as though they had been scratched into the mud only a day or two before.

DRACO•RVF•M•P•II

Next to the letters there was an arrow, pointing in the direction of Din Pharaon.

‘There!’ said Vortigern. There was an odd sort of triumph in his eyes. ‘Some new enemy is working against us, my boy. Someone is trying to help Germanus find us. Do you see?’

‘Yes, my lord,’ said Eldol. ‘Well, no. What does it say?’

A windy laugh escaped from the old man. He looked torn between amusement and rage.

‘It says, “*draco rufus duo milia passuum*”—the red dragon, two miles!’

XXXIV

Straight away there was a sweep of the area around the valley for more messages like the first. More were found drawn in the dirt, daubed on rocks, or carved into tree trunks by the roadside. The villagers eradicated any messages they found, and when that was done the gates of Din Pharaon were barred shut.

Work on the outer ramparts was suspended. Vortigern stopped coming out of his hall, and Maucant became his mouthpiece. Sometimes it was obvious that the orders he gave were of his own invention, but sometimes it was not so clear. Rex Brittanorum was now a silent and unseen power, divinely inscrutable. Perhaps, Eldol thought, he might even be dead.

No one was allowed outside the fort any more. Every man at Din Pharaon was counted as a weapon against the enemy closing in on them, and every man's life was valuable. The days of building empires out of daydreams were gone. The scent of panic always hung in the air, and it only made things worse that all was quiet outside the fort. The near constant whispering among the villagers, as far as Eldol could understand it, was all about the messages. Who had left them? Who could have known that Vortigern had ended up here, in this nameless valley half a day's ride from anywhere?

Perhaps Eldol wasn't so stupid after all, because he knew the answer. To him it was obvious. He felt no satisfaction in knowing, however, because he knew the others would work it out for themselves sooner or later. When they did, things would only get worse.

Maucant announced that rations would be reduced to one meal a day per person. It was judged uneconomical to keep the horses alive, so they were butchered and salted. Neither Eldol nor the villagers ever saw any of the meat. The mead ran out again, but by now the men were too dispirited to harbour any serious thoughts of mutiny. The days of labouring in the heat were replaced by endless hours of watching in silence, starting at every bird's call and every rustle in the trees below. Eldol went to bed every night with a grumbling stomach and no longer tried to make conversation with Ambris.

Then one night the boy was not there.

Maucant appeared on the hilltop first thing the next morning, banging a spoon against a metal pot and shouting for everyone to come out of their huts. The villagers filed out, wide awake. They must have thought the enemy had come for them at last, but Eldol knew better. Maucant made a long announcement in the villagers' language, which he then summarised for Eldol's benefit.

'We've found the traitor in our midst. According to the laws of our king, the traitor will stand trial at noon today.'

There was nothing to be done, so Eldol stayed in his hut out of the heat. He sat on the

floor by the doorway and he watched the sun curve through the sky, saw the shadows dwindle, and every moment that passed without incident was a tiny reprieve.

Eldol saw Maucant before he heard him. He came out from Vortigern's hall and beat the spoon against the pot again, but when he stopped this time he made no announcement. The villagers came out from their huts. Eldol dragged himself off the floor to join them.

Then the boy appeared, brought out of the hall by two villagers dressed in armour taken from the infantrymen they had killed. His hands were tied, and he walked with some difficulty. Eldol tried his best not to show any reaction when he saw the state of the boy's face. They had given him a grown man's beating. Eldol lowered his head and felt tears drop away when he blinked. The boy could not have thought that his youth would make Vortigern show him any mercy. So why had he done it? All that remained to him now was death, and it was sure to be a cruel one.

Then came the confirmation that Vortigern was alive after all. The old man stood in the doorway of his hall while two more armoured villagers set up his chair behind him. He looked smaller, beginning to disappear under all the bearskins and jewellery. His blue eyes looked hard and opaque even at a distance. Not too long ago Eldol had been fond of Vortigern. He could hardly believe that now. He hated the old man with all his heart, and he regretted more than anything that he had not left him to die at Ambrosius's fort.

Vortigern spoke, and his voice was as clear and undiminished as ever.

'I call you here to witness justice. The accused party is the boy we know as Ambris. Who makes the accusation?'

'I do,' said Maucant.

'And who will stand as his advocate?'

'I will,' said Eldol quietly. He did not look at the boy, but he could picture the disappointment on his face. No doubt he was only putting himself under suspicion, perhaps offering himself up for the same fate. He might even make things worse for the boy. But there was no one else, and that was all there was to it.

Vortigern cleared his throat and inclined his head slightly, and all at once he was just the way Eldol remembered him. The half-mad despot was gone. The old politician was here, and the proceedings suddenly took on a measure of gravitas.

'So be it. I will preside over this process, and I will hear your arguments without passion or bias. Let us begin.'

The trial got underway with Maucant's opening speech, in which he outlined his case against the boy. He had deduced that Ambris was the culprit when the messages were first discovered, but it had been necessary to prove it beyond any doubt. To this end the villagers had tried to beat a confession out of him, but he would say nothing.

'And all the while, the wicked boy kept his eyes on our beloved king, and with such hatred in his eyes! "This is no ordinary boy," I said to myself, "but the son of one of the devils of the air, sent down to ruin our efforts to defend ourselves!" While the hated Roman waits outside the walls of Din Pharaon, this traitor walks among us. Only he could have left those messages, because he is the only one here apart from the king and myself who can read and write in the Roman tongue.'

The villagers gathered on the hilltop showed no reaction to the speech. They probably didn't understand a word of it.

‘The advocate may begin his rebuttal,’ said the voice from the chair.

Everyone turned to look at Eldol.

‘What is the boy’s motive?’ he began weakly. He had sometimes heard the question asked by advocates in the basilica at Glevum.

Maucant beamed at Eldol, as though he were proud of him for having made the effort.

‘His motive need not concern us. We have proof of his guilt.’

‘What is the proof?’

‘That he is the only possible culprit.’

And there Eldol came unstuck.

‘But... well, it might have been him...’

‘It can only have been him.’

‘Well, even if it was... look, anyone can make a mistake. He’s a boy, for God’s sake. Fourteen years old. He’s seen everyone dying around him in the most horrible, violent ways. The poor boy’s out of his wits, I’m sure of it. I’m sure he didn’t really know what he was doing. And look at him; he’s been beaten black and blue. Isn’t that punishment enough? Wouldn’t it be a noble thing to show him clemency?’

He stopped there. The villagers still showed no reaction, but Maucant looked outraged. Perhaps Eldol had broken the rules by appealing to Vortigern’s better nature. He looked to the old man for a response. Vortigern was playing his role to the hilt now, stroking his beard and furrowing his brow. Eldol could almost feel how the decision must weigh on him.

‘It might be a noble thing indeed,’ he said. ‘To turn the other cheek when we have been struck, as one might say. But there is more to consider. Let us hear what the accused has to say for himself.’

The boy did not respond.

‘How about it, boy? Would you care to show us what a fine speaker you can be? No? Your silence does you no credit. As for your motive, I know very well why you tried to betray us. Did you really think I hadn’t guessed who you are? “Ambris” is only the Britannic form of a Roman family name, is it not? And a rather famous name at that. But that was never enough to condemn you, boy. It was your actions that did that.’

The boy opened his mouth to speak, but Vortigern cut him off and gestured to the two men who held his arms.

‘Take him out of the fort and cut his throat. Leave his body out for the crows.’

The two armoured villagers hauled the boy away by his arms as though he weighed nothing, with his legs and feet trailing limply through the mud behind him. For the first time in weeks the gates were unbarred and dragged open, and out they went. Some other villagers began to drag the gates shut again. Eldol found himself walking towards the shrinking gap.

‘Eldol!’ It was Vortigern’s voice behind him. He did not turn around. ‘Eldol, where do you think you’re going?’

He broke into a run. One of the villagers stood in his path, raising his hands and shaking his head. Eldol hurled him to one side, making him stagger for a good ten yards before he landed flat on his back. Then he was outside and running down the track around the side of the hill. He picked up speed, and he began to panic because he knew they might have already killed the boy. Now he was sprinting blindly, his forearms held up in front of his face to ward off the branches that swatted at him from left and right. He prayed he would not trip and fall,

because then all would be lost.

Now he was on the road near where the river ran into the lake. The two villagers stood at some distance up ahead, facing him. The boy lay face-down in the road. Eldol could not tell if he was alive or dead. The two men crept forwards and spread out to flank him, and both held their spears level with their heads, ready to throw. Eldol knew that in all likelihood he was about to die.

‘Put your spears down,’ he called out to the men. ‘I’m giving you an order. Put down your spears and go back to the fort.’

One of the men started to laugh derisively, but the other looked indignant.

‘You not master any more,’ the indignant one shouted. ‘You not loyal to king!’

Eldol could not say why, but he had the impression that the laughing man was the more dangerous of the two. With nothing more than that in his mind, he put his head down and charged at him.

The laughing man stopped laughing and threw his spear. Eldol felt it miss his face by inches, felt his cheek buffeted by the wind from it, as he closed the gap between them. He grabbed the man’s head in both his hands and dragged him to the ground. There he smashed the man’s head against ground over and over again until he felt the skull crack apart.

The second villager had already thrown his spear. It had landed wide of Eldol by what seemed like miles. Eldol let go of the bloody cracked shell and stalked towards the second man, who was backing away but not yet running.

When the second man was dead Eldol came to his senses. The boy had not stirred from where he lay on the road. Eldol reached him and turned him over onto his back. The only movement was from the wind blowing his white-blond hair across his forehead. His eyes were closed, but he was breathing normally. Eldol undid the cords around the boy’s wrists. Then he slung the boy over his shoulder, and started down the road away from Din Pharaon. When he felt the boy kicking his legs to be let down, he set him on his feet.

‘Are you all right?’

‘Yes. Thank you.’

‘Can you walk?’

‘Yes.’

That was all they said, and they carried on down the road. The sky was still bright, but the air had grown cold by the time they heard the sound of approaching hooves ahead. It was loud, deep and heavy. Eldol was surprised when only one rider appeared. He wore a brass helmet with nasal bar and cheek flaps, and a mail shirt that came down almost to his knees. In his right hand he held a long spear with an iron tip.

‘Stay calm,’ said the boy, but it was lost under the noise. The cavalryman was upon them.

‘Stop right where you are! What’s your name? Out with it!’

The question was screamed rather than asked, and spittle flew out from his bristly muzzle.

‘My name’s Eldol, soldier. I’m a magistrate from Glevum.’

‘Glevum?’ The cavalryman sounded like he was looking for an excuse to lose his temper. ‘What are you doing all the way up here, then?’

Eldol opened his mouth, but then he realised he had no idea what the answer was. He could hear more horsemen coming.

‘Please, sir,’ the boy butted in. ‘I’m the one who’s been leaving the messages for you. I

can take you to Vortigern.'

'Is that right?' said the cavalryman, still at the top of his voice, but his tone had changed. He raised the point of his spear a little so that it was no longer aimed directly at Eldol's eye. 'Well then, young man, you'd better tell me your name for a start.'

The boy managed something like a smile as more horsemen appeared in the distance.

'I am Flavius Ambrosius Aurelianus the younger. You will have heard of my father, I think.'

XXXV

First, they separated Eldol from the boy and made him walk all the way to their camp. He was too tired to be afraid. The sun was setting, and all he could think about was the need to sit down somewhere and get warm. He knew they were taking him to Bishop Germanus, but he had no idea whether he should expect to be given a bed or a beheading. He did not much care which.

Upon entering the camp, Eldol saw hundreds of soldiers watching him, measuring him up. Here was the criminal, the villain, Vortigern's right hand man. He expected them to start jeering and cursing his name at any moment. They put him in what must have been the smallest and darkest tent in the entire camp, and then they left him alone. A long time passed before anyone came in to see him.

First there was another shouting cavalry officer, though not the same man who had stopped them on the road from Din Pharaon. This one was worse. Every question he asked was accompanied by a threat or an insult, and he was clearly very angry about something. Eldol's willingness to answer his questions seemed only to make him angrier. Eventually the officer ran out of questions and they all went away.

Soon afterwards an infantryman came in with a tray of piping hot food. Eldol wept openly in gratitude. He found he could not eat even half of what was put before him, since his stomach had grown used to the rations at Din Pharaon. As soon as he was finished, he curled up and fell asleep on the ground.

In the morning he awoke with a start and found that a stranger was in the tent, sitting near the entrance with the light behind him.

'I brought you your breakfast,' the seated man said, nodding towards another tray on the floor. 'I suppose you must be Eldol.'

Eldol did not reply. He grabbed the tray off the floor and stuffed as much food into his mouth as he could. His appetite was better today.

'I don't think we've met before, have we?' the man continued. 'My name's Anblaud. I'm in charge of Ariconium, just a little way north of Glevum. Well, my friend, I can tell you there's nothing for you to be worried about. The boy told us all about how you rescued him from Vortigern's men. You might not know it, but you're something of a hero around here.'

'A hero?' said Eldol with his mouth full. 'So you're not here to torture me, then?'

'Of course not. Why would you think that?'

Eldol told him about the man who had questioned him the previous day.

'You should have heard him. Shouting and threatening the whole time. I answered everything he asked me as best I could, and then he just left. I figured I wasn't going to get

off that easily. So you've not come to pick up where he left off?'

'No. I actually had no idea someone had been in to speak to you already. You said it was a cavalryman?'

'That's right. He had expensive-looking gear on, a breastplate and so on. Square head, blond hair, red face.'

'Ah. Big fellow, was he?'

'Maybe to you.'

'I thought as much. That was Glivis. He's eager to please the bishop, but he's got a real knack of getting it wrong.'

'Do you mean the consiliar Glivis? The magistrate from Tamium?'

'If words like "magistrate" and "consiliar" still mean anything, then yes. Lately I've been hearing words like "king" and "protector" more often. Just a couple of months ago I would have considered myself a magistrate, like you.'

'Not like me, I think.'

'Well, perhaps not.'

'I think I remember you from Britu's funeral. Which town is yours again?'

'Ariconium.'

'Ah yes. With the iron mines.'

'That's right.' Anblaud leaned into the light, showing Eldol an earnest and pained expression. It seemed a rather contrived gesture. 'There is one question I'd like to ask you, Eldol.'

'What's that?'

'Why did you and Vortigern come all the way out here? Why didn't you just both go to Glevum? You would have been safest there.'

'That's not what we heard. We were told that Hengest had gone there with all his men.'

'Hengest? No, Hengest hasn't been seen since the massacre at Ambrosius's fort. Some of his men followed us up into Povisia, but... no, no one has attacked Glevum. Who told you that?'

'I... I don't remember.'

It was good news, but it stirred no feeling of relief. Glevum was just a word to him now.

Anblaud went on to tell him about the changes in the political landscape over the last two months. This tyrant had been killed, that tyrant had taken his place. This region had seceded, that region had been reclaimed. Cities and regions that Eldol had never visited had changed hands, changed names or had given up the ghost altogether. None of it meant much to him. Eventually Anblaud interrupted himself to ask Eldol if there was anything he could get for him.

'I'd like to see a priest,' he said. 'A lot has happened since I last went to confession.'

Anblaud left, and quite a long time later, a priest came into the tent.

'Forgive my lateness,' he said in very clear, precise Britannic. 'I'm afraid I was held up.'

'You're a Saxon,' said Eldol.

The priest bristled.

'Yes. I'm afraid you'll have to forgive me for that too.'

'Oh, no, I didn't mean anything like that. I'm sorry. It's just that I've never met a Saxon priest before. I was surprised, that's all.'

The priest's eyes softened.

'It is a rarity, I'll admit. It's made other Saxons tend to look upon me as a foreigner, so I suppose it works both ways. Shall we begin?'

Eldol confessed to the murder of the horse breeder in Bomium, and to the killings of the two villagers the previous day. He confessed to killing the two Jutes at Ambrosius's fort. Finally he listed every misdemeanour he could remember committing since the Kalends of May. Most of these were merely embarrassing. The priest looked bored. But then Eldol remembered Ambris, and all other thoughts were driven from his head.

'The boy I came in here with; have you seen him?'

'Ambrosius's son? Yes, I dressed his wounds when they brought him in. He'd suffered quite a beating.'

'Then he's all right?'

'He will be, but he needs lots of rest. I daresay you do too, my lord.'

'Can I see him?'

'In time. As I said, he needs time to recuperate. He's staying in Bishop Germanus's tent, so I'd have to get permission, of course. I'm sure the bishop is looking forward to meeting you.'

Eldol remembered the imposing figure who had stood before the masses in Venta Silurum, and all of a sudden he only wanted to be left alone. The priest left, and Eldol saw no one else that day. He awoke to another generous breakfast. After a doze on the floor of the tent and an equally generous luncheon, Anblaud came to see him again. They had found him a bigger tent, with a bed.

He followed Anblaud out into the light and noise of the camp, and his senses were overwhelmed. It was the first time he had been outside in two days. The soldiers took no notice of him. Perhaps he was old news by now. The camp really was like a small town, with tents arranged in blocks and little streets between them. Something was happening outside a huge white tent in the centre of the camp, a tent that could only belong to the bishop. A crowd had gathered.

'What's going on over there?'

'An execution,' said Anblaud. 'Come on, it's not far now.'

'Wait a moment. Who—'

'Saxons. Some of them got drunk and started a brawl last night. Two of my men were killed.'

Eldol peered over the heads of the soldiers as they passed close by. The crowd had formed a ring around the Saxons—Eldol counted nineteen of them—who knelt on the ground in front of the bishop's tent with their wrists and ankles tied. About half of them were blindfolded. A diminutive fair-haired figure moved along the line, putting blindfolds on the rest of them.

'Ambris!'

The boy didn't seem to hear. Behind him, the spectators parted to let Bishop Germanus enter the ring. He was just as Eldol remembered him, except that he now wore a monk's cowl instead of his gleaming robes. In his hands he held a very large curved knife.

More soldiers came to watch the spectacle. The circle grew tighter and deeper, blocking Eldol's view. He felt a hand on his arm and saw Anblaud's beseeching face looking up at

him.

‘Don’t watch. Come quickly.’

Anblaud led him to the other side of the camp, to his new tent. As soon as they were inside, Eldol was overcome by a sudden boldness. He grabbed Anblaud by the arm.

‘What’s going on here?’

‘You... you’ll have to be more specific.’

‘Ambris. Why is he with the bishop? Why is he helping him kill those men?’

‘Because the bishop wishes it to be so. Besides, Ambris is going to be our leader.’

‘Your leader?’

Anblaud frowned at Eldol, who let go of him. He walked over to the bed on the other side of the tent and sat down.

‘Yes, our leader. He is Ambrosius’s son.’

‘He’s fourteen years old!’

‘Don’t be stupid, Eldol. You know that means nothing. Plenty of those soldiers out there are fourteen, or not much older.’

‘And would you let your son—’

‘Of course not. But he’s not my son, and he’s not yours either. His being here has changed everything. After we dealt with the scouting party Hengest sent after us, we went to see Cunedag. Do you know who that is, Eldol?’

‘I’ve heard the name.’

‘I’ll bet you have, I’ll bet you have. We’d heard Vortigern had gone to hide under his skirts, and we wanted to see whether he’d cooperate with us. It went quite well. He said he wouldn’t help us, but he wouldn’t stand in our way either. Even he could see that Vortigern’s time was over. But the bodies...’

‘Bodies?’

‘Cunedag has built a new fortress at the mouth of the Canovia. On every approach to the place, he’s got bodies hanging from the trees on either side of the road. Men, women, children. Our soldiers saw that, and the spark went right out of them. They didn’t know what they were fighting for any more.

‘But then along comes this boy, Ambrosius Aurelianus’s son, looking like the man himself back from the dead after ten years. He moves like him, he talks like him. When you brought him into the camp it turned everything around, and they’ve got someone they can stand behind now.’

‘But he’s still a child. What can a child do?’

‘Quite a lot, as it happens. Did you know he helped build the fortifications at Vortigern’s fort?’

‘Of course. He was out there all the time.’

‘That’s right. He knows every inch of the defences, and he even left a weak spot at the back for us to get through.’

Eldol found himself grinning at the boy’s cleverness.

‘He’d planned it all along?’

‘Of course he did. And he left a message for us back when you were in Bomium. We wouldn’t even have been looking for you here if it wasn’t for him.’

‘So Ambris and Calixus were in on the bishop’s plan from the beginning?’

‘Far from it. But the abbot at their monastery had a plan of his own. The boy has been tutored in the arts of warfare and politics for years. The fellow at the Theodosian College, the ex-soldier—what was his name?’

‘Saturninus.’

‘Saturninus, yes. He was supposed to finish the boy’s training, but of course you know what happened there. So there were two separate plots to get rid of Vortigern. Now, through all these strange twists of fate, they’ve come together. Povia is back in our hands. The northern regions are all willing to join us if we can get behind a credible leader. It might be years yet before there’s a real united front, but...’

And on he went, earnest and pained, but Eldol had stopped listening.

They moved camp the next day. All that remained of that transient city was the smoking ruins of a hundred campfires. Before noon they reached the foot of the hill where Vortigern had built his little capital, and the first thing the soldiers did was to raze the lakeside village to the ground. They made their new encampment on its site.

In the afternoon they took their axes and began to fell trees randomly around the valley, not because they needed timber, but because it was noisy and impossible to ignore. When that was done, Glivis’s cavalry made circuits of the hill at full gallop. The infantrymen marched around the foot of the hill as far as the terrain permitted, shouting up slogans and war cries.

‘Death to the Vitalini!’

‘Death to the tyrant!’

‘No prisoners!’

But more of them shouted, ‘Ambrosius! Ambrosius!’, and there was not the smallest sound from the hilltop in answer.

Over the next few days Eldol rarely saw Ambris. When he did it was only ever a fleeting glimpse of him going from one tent into another, always with the bishop, and always with a troop of soldiers behind him.

Then one evening, after the sun was gone behind the mountains, Anblaud came into Eldol’s tent. He walked unsteadily, but it was only when Eldol saw the jar in his visitor’s hand that he realised he was drunk.

‘Brought you some wine,’ Anblaud said, sitting down uninvited. ‘Thought you might like some. It’s hard to come by these days.’

‘That it is,’ said Eldol, looking about for a cup. ‘What’s brought this on?’

‘They’ve stormed the fort. Vortigern will be dead by now.’

Eldol almost dropped the cup he had just found. He sat down opposite Anblaud, who poured him a measure of wine with a surprisingly steady hand.

‘Are you a little sad to hear it?’

‘No,’ said Eldol, but it was not true. He hated himself for it. ‘Is it certain? Is he definitely dead?’

Anblaud shrugged.

‘He ought to be, by now. My men will have breached the weak point at the northeastern face. There’s a sheer drop that’s very easy to climb, according to young Ambrosius. So many tree roots and branches that it’s as good as a ladder. The bishop has sent his Saxons up against the gates, to draw the defenders to that end of the fort.’

‘They don’t stand a chance of getting near the gates.’

‘No, that’s the point. They’re just moving targets.’

‘And what are Glivis’s cavalymen doing?’

Anblaud let out a drunkard’s laugh, loud and long.

‘Not a damned thing! There’s nothing for them to do here, and Glivis is not happy about it, I can tell you.’

‘Why aren’t you up there leading your men?’

‘I’m no general. Besides, young Ambrosius is leading them.’

Eldol’s fists clenched on the tabletop.

‘Don’t get angry,’ said Anblaud. ‘Drink your wine. I’ve told you before, you can’t be protective of him. The boy’s fourteen, old enough to enlist. He’s leading the assault because he’s the best man to do it, and he’ll lead many more before his time’s up.’

The Saxon priest who had heard Eldol’s confession came into the tent, his gaze averted deferentially.

‘I hope I’m not intruding. I just saw the light from outside, and...’

‘Come on in,’ said Anblaud, and then he turned to Eldol. ‘If you don’t mind, of course. No? Then come in, my friend, have a seat. Have a cup with us.’

The priest came in but did not sit down.

‘That’s kind of you, my lord, but I only came to ask, well... I can’t find anyone. Bishop Germanus, Severus, Glivis; they’re nowhere to be seen.’

‘They’ve gone to storm the fort,’ said Eldol. ‘Please do join us.’

The priest sat down.

‘Then that explains the fire.’

‘Fire?’

‘The hilltop is all ablaze. I only went out of my tent because I heard a terrible noise, like a landslide—’

‘Breached the wall,’ said Anblaud, nodding stupidly.

‘—and then the sounds of fighting. No, not fighting. Killing. There were no battle cries, only screams. And then there was fire...’ He rubbed his forehead with the ball of his hand. ‘Do you know, I think I will have a drink after all.’

Eldol offered the priest his cup. He was in no mood for wine.

‘This is Eoppa,’ said Anblaud. ‘He’s a Saxon.’

‘I know, we’ve already met.’

‘Eoppa found Vortigern’s son. Rescued him from the Middle Saxons and brought him to Venta Silurum, safe and sound.’

A slight smirk dimpled the priest’s cheek, and then it was gone.

‘Well, that’s not quite true, my lord. I met him when he was... welcomed in by the Middle Saxons, and I mediated a little.’

‘Do you mean Vortigern’s youngest son?’ said Eldol. ‘The one who’s a child?’

‘Yes,’ said Eoppa. ‘The only one who’s still alive. I won’t relish breaking the news to him that his father is dead. I don’t suppose there’s any chance they might have taken him prisoner?’

Anblaud shook his head.

‘No chance at all. They’ll leave none alive up there.’

The priest nodded, gulped down the wine in one draught, and then stood.

‘Then I’ll say goodnight, my lords. Thank you for your hospitality.’

He was determined not to go up there, and he remained determined until well into the afternoon. The fighting was over. There was no one to rescue, nothing to retrieve, nothing to repair. No reason at all to go up there.

It surprised Eldol how much it was possible to learn by staying in bed, from listening to all the different men talking outside his tent. Bishop Germanus and Severus were gone. They had left at dawn, perhaps to seek new challenges in Gallia. The fort on the hill was utterly destroyed. Vortigern was dead, personally beheaded by Ambris, or Ambrosius, or whatever else they might call him. There was plenty of loot to be divided among the soldiers, and they would all go back home with full pockets.

There was nothing for Eldol on the hilltop, he knew. And yet he got out of bed and dressed himself, and went out through the camp, which was by now as quiet as a graveyard. No one was around to challenge him. He followed the track that wound up past the looming rock face, crowned by the charred remnant of the palisade. On he went through the gap where the gates used to be, out into the ridged hollow of the hilltop.

The soldiers sat around on the rocks, talking and basking in the sun. The bodies of Vortigern’s men had been collected into piles near the square pit that Maucant had called his church. No one had bothered to collect the corpses of the women. They lay strewn about the place wherever they had fallen, and some lay with faces fixed forever in a look of terror or despair. Within the smoking foundations of Vortigern’s hall, Eldol could make out charred skulls and ribcages amongst the piles of blackened timber.

Off to his side he saw the priest Eoppa. With him was a little boy with a very dirty face, except for where his tears had cut clean streaks.

‘No survivors?’ Eldol called out to the priest.

‘No survivors. None but those who fought for Bishop Germanus.’ The priest patted the boy’s head. ‘My lord, this is Pascent.’

Eldol nodded a greeting to the boy and mumbled, ‘Sorry for your loss.’

The boy did not reply.

‘I wasn’t expecting to see you here,’ said a voice behind Eldol. It was Anblaud. ‘Did you have any friends up here?’

Eldol shook his head.

‘Definitely not.’

‘Good. Nothing could have been done even if you had, I’m afraid. Did you leave anything valuable up here?’

Eldol did not answer. From the other side of the hill there came a clamour of tramping footsteps and raised voices, growing louder. It was Anblaud’s infantrymen, and they were carrying Ambris on their shoulders. He was grinning, and his face was blackened by smoke and dirt. The men repeated his name in a call-and-response chant punctuated by ear-splitting cheers.

‘Ambrosius!’

‘Hey!’

‘Ambrosius!’

'Hey!'

Eldol felt sick.

The soldiers set the boy down on his feet, still grinning, and they gave him a round of applause. He had a big curved knife tucked into his belt. It was the same knife Bishop Germanus had used to behead the Saxons in the old camp, and undoubtedly the knife that killed Vortigern.

Before anyone could stop him, Pascent dashed across the hilltop and threw a punch at Ambris's face. Ambris took a step or two back, but that was all. He caught Pascent by the front of his tunic and struck him again and again until he sank to his knees. Very soon the smaller boy's face was covered in blood. Ambris seized Pascent by the hair and drove his face into the dirt. The priest started towards them but Anblaud caught him by the sleeve.

'Don't. They'll kill you if you interfere.'

The priest stayed where he was, and wept.

Ambris was astride Pascent now, rubbing his face in the mud, hoarsely spitting out the new swear words he had learnt from the infantrymen, who cheered him on. Eventually he got up off his victim and walked away. Eldol now saw, looking at Ambris's bloody fists, that he was wearing Vortigern's dragon head ring. The soldiers hoisted Ambris onto their shoulders again and bore him off in a different direction.

'Ambrosius!'

'Hey!'

'Ambrosius!'

'Hey!'

Now that it was safe to do so, the priest rushed over to the victim, sobbing loudly and unashamedly. He helped the boy to his feet. Pascent was crying too, but they were tears of impotent rage.

'Live to fight another day, Pascent,' the priest said through hitching breath. *'Let's go home now.'*

He took Pascent by the hand and led him away. The boy gave Eldol a look of utter detestation as he walked past him, as though the whole thing were his fault.

'It's probably time we all went home now,' said Anblaud abstractedly. *'No doubt you're eager to get back to Glevum, eh, Eldol? I'll bet you've got a wife and children waiting for you there. No? Well, there's plenty of time...'*

Eldol stared at the charred bones in the ruin of the hall, wondering if he was looking at Vortigern's remains or Maucant's, or even those of the villager women that he had idly rutted with in that little hut. Those women were dead because of him. This strange habit he had developed lately, this insistence upon trying to stop people from being murdered, seemed to be quite lethal.

'Have I been on the wrong side all along?' he said. *'Or am I on the wrong side now?'*

Anblaud shrugged.

'I don't know. You survived.'

That much was true. He would go back to Glevum, and he would get older and fatter and stupider. The clerks at the basilica would be glad to have him back. But then no doubt war with the Jutes would break out in earnest very soon. Perhaps then Glevum would not need a magistrate, but a king. That thought truly frightened Eldol.

‘So what happens now?’

‘We get to go home, Eldol. That’s not such a bad end to things, is it?’

‘And then?’

‘We’ll just have to see.’

‘But what will I tell people when they ask me? What do I say to them about everything that’s happened these last few months?’

Anblaud looked exhausted as he gazed out across the darkening valley. In the distance the sun broke momentarily through the clouds, and then was gone.

‘You’ll think of something.’